

# gather

FOR FAITH AND ACTION

January/February 2015

PROCESSED

DEC 09 2014

GTU LIBRARY

Reconciliation and the River of Life  
Barriers to Transformation

Safe at Home  
Making Conversion Stick





100

YEARS OF STRENGTH  
AND STABILITY

*You could invest in an ordinary IRA.  
Or you could invest in an IRA that lends a helping hand.*

FAITH LUTHERAN CHURCH  
LAVALLETTE, NEW JERSEY

Save for retirement with the Mission Investment Fund and you might just save an ELCA congregation. That's because your investments earn a great rate of return and finance loans to ELCA congregations like Faith Lutheran. When Superstorm Sandy destroyed the renovations Faith had financed with an MIF loan, MIF deferred Faith's loan payments until the congregation got back on its feet. Why invest in just any IRA when you can invest in one with a heart?



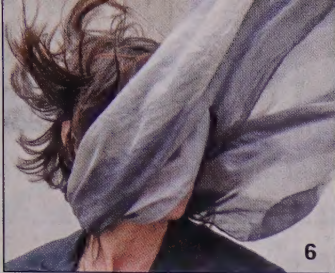
**Mission Investment Fund**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

To learn more about the competitive interest rates and flexible terms we offer on a wide range of investments for individuals and congregations as well as ministry loans, contact our financial services center at [mif.elca.org](http://mif.elca.org) or 877.886.3522.

IRAs • SAVINGS ACCOUNTS • CHECKING ACCOUNTS • COLLEGE SAVINGS • MINISTRY LOANS

Mission Investment Fund investments are subject to certain risks. See "Risk Factors" in the MIF Offering Circular. MIF investments are not bank accounts. As securities issued by a nonprofit institution, the investments are not insured by FDIC, SIPC or any other federal or state regulatory agency. The securities are sold only by means of the Offering Circular. This is not an offer to sell or a solicitation of an offer to buy the securities described here.





Editor Kate Sprutta Elliott  
 Managing Editor Terri Lackey  
 Editor, *Café* Elizabeth McBride

Art Direction On Track Marketing  
 Cover Jenni Byron  
[gathermagazine.org](http://gathermagazine.org)

## BEING MADE NEW

VOLUME 28 NUMBER 1 JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2015

In repentance we turn our hearts back to God to receive forgiveness and learn to forgive others.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>6 Barriers to Transformation</b></p> <p><b>10 Being Philip</b></p> <p><b>14 As We Forgive</b></p> <p><b>18 The Awe-ful Truth</b></p> <p><b>22 Reconciliation and the River of Life</b></p> <p><b>26 Safe at Home</b></p> <p><b>38 Making Conversion Stick</b></p> | <p>What keeps us from becoming the person God made us to be? <i>Sara Olson-Smith</i></p> <p>How do we make "the other" feel welcome? <i>Jeff Frohner</i></p> <p>Forgiveness is a basic requirement for whole and healthy living. <i>E. Louise Williams</i></p> <p>King David broke all 10 commandments, and God still forgave him and used him for good. <i>Marguerite Rourk</i></p> <p>We are sent into the world as servants of the reconciling risen Christ. <i>Liv Larson Andrews</i></p> <p>Far from protecting us from the messiness of life, the Bible often exposes it. <i>Gwen Sayler</i></p> <p>Conversion can be passionate and thrilling, but how does it keep its spark? <i>Meghan Johnston Aelabouni</i></p> |
|---|--|

## DEPARTMENTS

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>4 Voices</b></p> <p><b>5 Give Us This Day</b></p> <p><b>9 Let Us Pray</b></p> <p><b>36 Family Matters</b></p> <p><b>30 Bible Study</b><br/><b>Transforming Life and Faith</b></p> <p><b>42 Bible Study</b><br/><b>Transforming Life and Faith</b></p> <p><b>49 Grace Notes</b></p> <p><b>50 Amen!</b></p> | <p><b>A New Beginning</b> <i>Terri Lackey</i></p> <p><b>With God's Grace</b> <i>Elizabeth McBride</i></p> <p><b>Gratitude as Prayer</b> <i>Julie K. Ageson</i></p> <p><b>Final Treasures</b> <i>Sue Gamelin</i></p> <p><b>Session 5 Repent and Forgive</b><br/>King David commits grave sins against Bathsheba, Uriah, and God, and yet he repents and is forgiven. <i>Carol Schersten LaHurd</i></p> <p><b>Session 6 Making Conversion Last</b><br/>Conversion stories can illustrate what helps transformation succeed or fail. <i>Carol Schersten LaHurd</i></p> <p><b>The Balm of Forgiveness</b> <i>Linda Post Bushkofsky</i></p> <p><b>The Weight of Forgiveness</b> <i>Catherine Malotky</i></p> |
|---|---|

## PLUS ...

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>51 Directory of Reader Services</b></p> | <p>Subscription, editorial, and advertising information</p> |
|---|---|

[gathermagazine.org](http://gathermagazine.org)





VOICES

## A New Beginning

by Terri Lackey

### The theme of this issue,

“Being Made New,” is a fitting title as we begin 2015. You have heard a lot of talk about New Year’s resolutions. Exercise, weight loss, better nutrition will all make someone’s “I’ll do better this year” list. We believe that adopting life-improving habits will offer us a new beginning.

Maybe you have “forgive” on your list. Perhaps you were harmed recently or even long ago and you want desperately to forgive and forget so that you can heal. But you find it so difficult. God did not create us as erasable chalkboards. It is not so easy to “be made new.”

The good news is that forgetting is not necessary for forgiveness. But, a forgiving heart and hope for healing is, writes Louise Williams, a retired deaconess who lost a “beloved member of the deaconess community” to murder.

“Humanly speaking, there is no ‘forgive and forget,’” Williams writes. “Forgiveness is not forgetting the harm that has been done to us. God may be able to remember our sins no more, but we are not able to forgive and forget. The best we can do is to forgive and remember that it is forgiven.”

Some of you may need to forgive a person who has sexually abused you, a family member, or a friend. In “Safe at Home,” Gwen Sayler writes, “Abused sexually, ritually, and mentally in her childhood home, a friend of mine remains unable to feel safe in any home, including the house in which she has lived for many years. For her, terror lurks everywhere. No space is truly safe.”

Sayler’s writing of abuse in this month’s *Gather* came about because there is a possibility that King David was an abuser (2 Samuel 11). Did Bathsheba have a choice when the king summoned her to his bed? We know he was a murderer and adulterer.

The guy was a scoundrel, Marguerite Rourk claims in “Awe-ful Truth.” But God forgave David and used him for good.

“This story has fascinated Jews and Christians alike for hundreds of centuries because of David’s colossal me-ism and the magnitude of its consequences,” Rourk writes. “Surely if ever there were a total rotter unworthy and undeserving of any forgiveness, David was it.

“And yet, it happened. The impossible, the inconceivable, the when-hell-freezes-over happened all because our impossible, inconceivable, hell-freezing-over God opened the door to forgiveness.”

And you can forgive too. Holding on to your pain and failing to forgive is likely a barrier to your spiritual transformation.

“The barriers to spiritual transformation can be any remnant of the old lives we don’t want to leave behind,” Bible study author Carol LaHurd writes in Session 6, “Making Conversion Last.”

Sara Olson-Smith in “Barriers to Transformation” says that “letting go of [old, harmful habits and feelings] seems impossible, uncomfortable, and vulnerable.” It’s not easy.

But that’s what is required if we wish to transform our life and faith; if we wish to be made new. 🌿

**Terri Lackey** is managing editor of *Gather* magazine.





GIVE US THIS DAY

## With God's Grace

by Elizabeth McBride

**Recently I ran into a** friend while walking through our neighborhood. As we chatted, the subject moved to her latest family drama. I piped in, "Tell me about it. Who doesn't have family drama?" Despite the issues with her family, she said she has a good relationship with her sister and that it had made a positive difference in her life. Immediately, I felt left out. I had a lot of stories about drama I could offer, too, but none about having a close relationship with my sister.

My sister and I are different in almost every way. I recall only a few moments that we weren't fighting as children. She is the only person on the planet who can push my buttons so easily. The only issue we agree on, aside from music, is that we share the same parents. A tiny part of me, however, believes that one of us was switched at birth.

We grew up in a family that suffered with addiction. That established our sister dynamic—constantly vying for attention and love. Like most families who live with an addict, we each assumed a role. Mine was being the perfect child—or hero. My sister, the oldest sibling, was the scapegoat—the one who took the abuse. And then, she made sure that whenever my father was cruel to her, she, in turn, doled it out to me.

As adults, that dynamic persists, though we live in separate households and the alcoholic has long passed away. I often compare our relationship to a home with a cracked foundation. The cracks have been mended, but they still

exist under the plaster. I am learning, though, that it is in these cracks where my faith in God lives.

A few years ago, after a huge fight with my sister at my mom's house, I decided I could see no resolution to our relationship except to leave it to God. I wanted to release all my hurt and forgive my sister for the ways she hurt me, but I knew I couldn't do it by myself.

I asked God to heal us and help us have peace. After we unloaded about 30 years of transgressions and misunderstandings on each other, a shift took place. Immediately after the fight, my sister turned to me and asked, "Do you think you and I could try to move forward?"

I'd like to say we have completely forgiven each other, but I'm not sure that's true. I do think we treat each other differently. With God's grace, our fight opened our communication and we began to come to terms with the painful trauma we experienced in childhood.

I also find comfort in knowing we each had a witness to our troubled childhoods. As adults, we can recognize, understand, and respect our different survival strategies.

Today, although we are not close like my friend and her sister, we are closer than we were. I don't believe forgiveness happens once. It is a daily, almost hourly, exercise, and it is difficult. Thankfully God can help us with that. 🌿

**Elizabeth McBride** is the director of Women of the ELCA's intergenerational programs and editor of *Café* ([boldcafe.org](http://boldcafe.org)), an online magazine for young adult women.





# BARRIERS TO TRANSFORMATION

by Sara Olson-Smith

Every December, my mom and I watch the movie “White Christmas.” I love Danny Kaye’s goofiness and Bing Crosby’s velvet voice, the crazy dancing and the sweet romance. Though I’ve watched it too many times to count, I recently noticed something in one scene.

The song-and-dance men played by Kaye and Crosby are in the dressing room after a performance. Their conversation is both funny and heartfelt as they change out of their show costumes and into street clothes. What I noticed about this scene was the ease, comfort, and near lack of skin of this wardrobe change. They carry on an important conversation while changing from one outfit to another with little effort, thought, or vulnerability.

It’s a different world now. This kind of careful filming to keep an audience from seeing too much skin is in the past. But I find this scene remarkable because change in our own lives is rarely easy or shows no skin. Of course, I’m not referring to wardrobe changes, but to the changes that make us new people, that deepen our relationships, that strengthen our faith, that transform us inside and out. Most of the time, these changes are nothing like that dressing room scene. Usually they

are complicated, awkward, and demand an honest vulnerability that feels like showing skin.

And this is why we tend to avoid it.

## Avoiding Change

Avoiding change is nothing new. Some 2,000 years ago, a rich young man came looking for Jesus. He wanted to know how to really live.

Jesus began by reminding him of God’s commandments. But this man said, “Yes, I’ve kept these laws. I’ve followed the rules.” To which Jesus replied, “You lack one thing: sell everything and give it to the poor. Then follow me” (Luke 18:18–22).

Jesus made it sound easy, like the actors did when changing clothes in a dressing room without a lag in the conversation. And yet the young rich man was filled with sorrow because he had too much money. It was too big a change, too complicated, and too uncomfortable. He wasn’t able to make the kind of transformation that Jesus demanded of him.

This rich man is not alone. He has us to keep him company. All of us have barriers that keep us from becoming the person we are made to be. Like the rich





Young man, we're not willing to let go of ideas or items that could lead us to live a fuller, more Christ-like life.

### Too Much of Something

Once I avoided going to a funeral visitation to pay condolences to a friend whose son had died from suicide. I had no idea what to say. I couldn't bear to see my friend hurting. And to this day I regret that. I didn't go because I had too much unease with both her pain and my own.

One of my friends is frequently invited to a vibrant Bible study group, but she never goes. I have no doubt the group would challenge her to think differently about her work and life. But my friend makes sure her schedule is full. Not only is she too busy, she is also too comfortable with her life as it is.

I talked with a woman who stayed too long in a relationship that was no good for her. Over and over, she'd talk of wanting to leave. I asked her why she couldn't do it. "I am just so worried about what would happen to me. It's the future that terrifies me. The relationship might not be good now, but at least it's familiar." She had too much fear of the unknown.

Too often, I've failed to speak up in response to racist or sexist comments and arguments. I may have strongly disagreed, but I had too much invested in needing to be liked and keeping people happy.

Some people, both conservative and progressive, are particular about whom they spend time with, what news they watch, what books they read. They have views of the world that can't be challenged. They have too much certainty and too much need for unquestioned answers.

We've all have too much of something that keeps us from becoming who God means us to be. Letting go of those things seems impossible, uncomfortable, and vulnerable. We have too much pride or fear. We tell ourselves too many lies. We're just too busy. All of this builds a barrier to spiritual transformation.

### Not Impossible with God

And yet, this story of the rich man didn't have to end as it did. Jesus warned that it is difficult to become a part of God's reign, as difficult as squeezing a camel through the eye of a needle. But it could be done.

Jesus says, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27). These are the words of grace that can dismantle the barriers of our "too much." It doesn't matter if we have too much money, too much fear, too much doubt, or too much certainty. No matter what barrier we build, God can break through.

This is what God's work through Jesus is all about. Jesus came to this world to bring life to all people. And if Jesus didn't let death stop him, he's not going to let our excuses, our fears, or our "too much" keep him from bringing us life, purpose, and wholeness.

### Becoming New

Our faith lives are about becoming new, better people, over and over from the moment water was poured on our heads in baptism. This baptized life is about being caught in the repeated cycles of dying and rising, failing and being forgiven, clinging and letting go.



There are always opportunities to be made new. Think of a kitchen being remodeled. Sometimes it happens after years of dreaming, with well-drawn out plans and money saved. Other times, the change happens gradually, over the years. First, install new cabinets, then new counters, and then replace the floors. Or sometimes, it happens because a tree fell through the roof and there is no choice but to remodel.

Our lives are “remodeled” in all kinds of ways, too. Sometimes a change is undertaken after years of anticipation. We might make a gradual change, growing from daily practices of prayer, conversation, worship, and generosity. Or we might be transformed by the unchosen and unbidden circumstances. Sometimes tragedies and losses in our lives open us up to new ways of seeing, living, or loving.

### Leaving Behind Our “Too Much”

On a warm August day about 10 years ago, I was kneeling in front of a huge suitcase and a backpack in the middle of the Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow, Russia. I’d lived in Moscow for a year, and I had the stuff to prove it. Beautiful linen, matryoshka nesting dolls, gifts from friends, and more. I had so much to bring home that I exceeded the airline’s baggage weight limit. I tried moving items around from bag to bag. But eventually and with great sadness, I had to leave some treasures behind on the floor of the airport. Now I have no recollection of what any of those precious items were.

After church one day this fall, I was talking with a sixth-grader after her first week of middle school. I asked her how it went, and she replied, “It was so great. I love it. I cannot believe that I was scared. I was so terrified on my first day, but now, it’s seems to be the silliest thing that I was afraid.”

It is often difficult to remember what our “too much” once was. Our fears and our worries weigh the most as we are on the precipice of change. My young daughter is embarking on her own little transforma-

tion, though not really a spiritual one. She’s getting potty trained. For a long time there was nothing—not even chocolate or stickers—that could convince her that being potty trained was worthwhile. But then she got some ballerina underwear and she caught a glimpse of how comfortable and cool she could be. There was no turning back to diapers.

The same is true for us. We can have the tenacity, determination, and courage to do the hard stuff of change when we can trust what is ahead. We can dare to dismantle those barriers when we see that there is some hope for us on the other side—meaningful work, deeper relationships, or more authentic and whole lives. With a purpose and vision, we might just find ourselves letting go of our “too much.”

### The Hope of the Needle

And this brings me back to that metaphor of a camel and a needle. Jesus could have picked any kind of hyperbole to demonstrate how difficult it is to become the people we are called to be. But he uses needles. Needles are used as tools to hold items together. We use them with thread to fasten a sleeve to a shirt, a shoe to a sole, or to make a quilt beautiful, strong, and warm.

This image offers us a vision of the kind of life we can know in Jesus, a life sewn up with others in connection to God. God is mending all the brokenness of our own lives. We are part of those stitches that God is using to mend our world, even when it seems inconceivable to thread us and all our “too much” into this action of grace.

This vision of healing, purpose, and connection might be just what we need to dismantle those impossible barriers to transformation. The changes will never be as smooth as they are in the scenes of old movies, but they will open us to really living. And like that rich young man, that is what we are seeking. 🌿

**Sara Olson-Smith** is an associate pastor at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa.





LET US PRAY

## Gratitude as Prayer

by Julie K. Ageson

**In our reflections about** prayer as a way of looking at the world, we focus this month on the letter G: gratitude as prayer. Gratitude seems a natural expression of prayer, an attitude that ought to be at the forefront of our everyday conversations with God. Giving thanks both for the good that surrounds us and the challenges that try our souls should be as natural as breathing. But how do we summon authentic gratitude to God, how do we live gratitude without allowing it to become self-satisfied affirmation, God's special blessing in *my* life? How do we thank God when the world is in a bag of hurt?

These last months of horrific and senseless suffering—yet again in Israel and Palestine, yet again in Central America where children flee for their lives, yet again in the Ukraine and the United States—make me painfully aware that too many in this world live in conditions where the privilege of gratitude is fleeting at best.

Yes, I live uneasily with this sense of God's blessing and abundance. Yes, I know that my birth here rather than there makes all the difference. Does that mean that God has blessed me and not them? How do we not twist gratitude into God's special blessing that at worst reeks of a God who favors some over others or a sense that God has blessed us in ways somehow withheld from others?

When we wake in the morning, grateful for the beauty of the world around us, aware that God is the giver of all of life, how does our gratitude take

into account the suffering around us? What does gratitude mean when morning in so many places in the world is the beginning of another day of survival, hunger, fear?

In the title of a recent book by Anne Lamott, she describes what she sees as three essentials of prayer, *Help, Thanks, Wow*. She begins with a plea for *help*. No stranger to suffering herself, Lamott is well acquainted with her own demons and savvy about the darkness of the world. And so she begins with *help!* All of us know the place from which that word comes, the knowledge that we aren't in control, that we need a God who walks with us.

And then in the face of the absurdities of life, Lamott's next prayer is *thanks*. Not for having a corner on God's blessing, but in simple gratitude that God is God, and that God lives with us in the darkness and the fear, in the bombings and shootings, in hopelessness and despair.

Lamott is honest enough to know that God's presence is mystery, that none of us understands how this works—that life isn't fair. But she affirms God's presence nonetheless because she's grateful for a God who knows sorrow and grief and fear. Help, thanks, and *wow!* Gratitude is our prayer to a God who suffers with us, dies for us, and likely is most present where darkness is most impenetrable. Amen. 🌸

**Julie K. Ageson** retired from ELCA Resource Center leadership and now she and her spouse write and travel.



# BEING

# PHILIP

by Jeff Frohner



We all want to belong. In my experience even the most cantankerous in our midst yearns for community. But somewhere along the line their experience of exclusion or hurt from some earlier event gets

translated into an ill-tempered front that is used as a shield to protect them from any further disappointment. If you take a moment to reflect on those times in your past when you have felt a sense of belonging, my guess is that you'll also discover that those moments were amongst the happiest of your life.

Philip in our Bible study from Acts 8 is sent to a man who is looking to belong. He is what we would call a seeker, someone who is looking for God. And make no mistake God has been at work in his life.

He holds in his hands the sacred scriptures of the Hebrew people, and he finds something intriguing about this God of Israel who calls God's people to be set apart. But not set apart as he has been set

apart—as a eunuch to protect the integrity of the royal house of Ethiopia—but to be set apart as a people who reflect the love, mercy, and holiness of a God who longs to continue in relationship with God's people.

It is curious that this one who rides in a chariot, who has servants around him (he calls out to them to stop when the water appears), and who has access to the places of highest power finds himself searching for more. And while we must be careful not to read our own agenda into Luke's story in Acts 8, I find it signifi-



cant that the Evangelist tells us that it was a desert road, a wilderness road, or as Eugene Peterson translates in *The Message*, “that desolate road” upon which the Ethiopian official was traveling.

### That desolate road

Ah, yes, that desolate road. I think we know that road all too well. It was the road we traveled when the post-partum depression turned what was supposed to be a time of joy and celebration into a lonely jaunt that made us want to disappear. It is that road that we found ourselves on when all the plans and dreams for our future seemed to come crashing down in a single moment of a friendless day. It is the well-trodden path of the people of God who, while asking the deepest questions of the human heart—who am I, what am I doing here, does anyone love me—find only silence to answer their inner-most thoughts. It is that road that offers more questions than answers about God and our place in the world.

I imagine that the Ethiopian is wonderfully dressed in a white tunic with gold trim and reads with confidence from the words of Isaiah (he would have been reading them out loud, for that was the custom in antiquity) as his driver and entourage make known to all whom they pass that this is a man of importance. And yet the man in the chariot, while looking as if he owned the world, may not be as confident and self-assured as he seems.

He is reading from the prophet Isaiah, a prophet who often spoke of the inclusion of all people and all nations by the God of Israel. “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations” (Isaiah 25:6–7). And I think this is not by chance, for the same set of scriptures speak of his particular sexual

status—he was a eunuch—and as such he was forbidden full inclusion into the house of Israel. He was welcome enough to study the scriptures and even participate peripherally in the great celebrations of the faithful. But he knew that in the eyes of some he would always be an outsider who would never fully belong. In fact, while Luke does not tell us so, this same Ethiopian who had gone up to worship may have been denied entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem.

His seeking God may have been met with a huge “Eunuchs not welcome” sign as some especially pious gatekeeper reminded him of the words of Deuteronomy 23:1—“No one whose testicles have been compromised shall be welcome here!” We don’t know, but this seeker of God may have been shown the door by those who were charged with keeping God’s house.

### Double epiphany

Set aside the fact that he was a eunuch and consider his wealth and station in life, for such things as these can also tend to isolate us from others and turn what looks like a luxurious way of life into nothing more than the proverbial gilded cage. Even those who appear to have it all together are often lonely and in search of a place to belong. How fitting that he was considering that particular part of Isaiah, what we know as one of the suffering servant songs, for he must have found a bit of comfort in those lonely words that came off the pages of the scroll and fell from his lips.

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth” (Acts 8:32b–33).

Here on this desolate road the Holy Spirit sent Philip to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. And what I love about the story is that there is a precious mutuality at work here. It is God, through the Holy Spirit that sends Philip to the Ethiopian, and it is the





Ethiopian who graciously invites Philip to come and sit beside him as they talk about God. They travel together down this desolate road in conversation and consolation which provides for a double epiphany.

One, the Ethiopian upon seeing water asks the imperative question: “What is to keep me from being baptized?” Read into this inquiry a bit of hesitation. That is, “Are your words about this Jesus who has come to call all people unto himself, to bring about the kingdom of God, and who calls us into a new community, are these words for me as well?”

Yes! They are for you and for all people. These are words of eternal life that begin with a promise that we belong to God. And the Ethiopian commanded the chariot to be stopped and he took hold of the promise as Philip baptized him in the name of Jesus Christ.

But a second epiphany was afoot as well. Philip on

that day began to see that this good news of Jesus was indiscriminate. That God was actively chasing those that many felt were excluded from belonging. Philip experienced that this good news would be able to bring people together who were worlds apart, and that this coming together began as they sat together and witnessed to one another asking questions about God and God’s word. While we rejoice that the Ethiopian official came to be baptized, we should also rejoice in the realization that the Holy Spirit gave Philip, and therefore the church, a reminder that ours is a God who is searching out the other, whoever that might be and bringing us together in community.

#### Divine mutuality

We, too, are called to be Philip in the world. And we do so keeping in mind that not only was Philip a blessing





to the Ethiopian, but that the Ethiopian was a blessing to Philip and to the community of Jesus.

There continues to be a wondrous mutuality at work when our faith compels us to reach out to those who are seeking God—seeking a place to belong—as they in turn bring to the community their own unique questions and experiences of how it is that God has been at work in their lives. We come to our neighbors not to make them into our image, but to see in them the image of God that continues to make our community whole.

I am convinced that the first step in this divine mutuality is providing a place for people to belong. It used to be when folks were thinking about joining a church that we would put them through a rather formal progression which followed a pattern of believe, practice, and belong. That is, we spent week after week

making sure that folks believed the right way, that they accepted our doctrine and teachings. Only after such thorough conversion of the intellect did we invite them to practice with us the faith. To come to communion and be a part of our communities, thus finally coming to belong.

Many of the emergent churches have begun to reverse this process: No longer is it believe, practice, and belong, but instead belong, practice, and believe. And I think it might be time for us to recognize that this may be a more biblical model of how it is we evangelize—one that is much more effective.

Like the Ethiopian, people need others to come alongside them as they travel their own particular desert roads. They want to know that their questions matter and that they'll be taken seriously. Most of all they want to know that there are churches out there where they are allowed to be who they are—imperfections and all—and still considered to be a part of the community. They need to know that our words of love are backed by sincere actions of hospitality and welcome.

It's time for us to emphasize belonging and to invite others—even if they still have questions and are wrestling with God—to be a part of our communities. I think we'll find that we are blessed by their presence, by their questions and struggles. I'll always remember one man in a former parish who told me, "Pastor, I'm the most faithful atheist you'll ever meet. I've come almost every Sunday for five years, and I'm still not convinced that there is a God; but I keep coming nonetheless."

Let us have room for folks like him. Let us honor people who are still asking questions by providing a place where they can belong and even participate in what we do. Moreover I think we'll be astonished at how the Holy Spirit will use such welcoming communities to nurture a deep and authentic faith in all of us. 🌿

**The Rev. Jeff Frohner** is pastor at Our Savior's Lutheran Church and School in San Clemente, Calif., where his wife, Kelly, has hosted eight annual *Gather* magazine Bible study intro events.



# AS WE FORGIVE

by E. Louise Williams



**I**t was a remorseful, but grateful man the two women encountered when they finally met in the visitation room at the prison. Several years before, he had brutally murdered one of our sister deaconesses. These two deaconesses had entered into a program sponsored by the prison where victims of crimes and the perpetrators can interact. They hadn't done it for the offender but for themselves and for all of us. We had lost a beloved member of our deaconess community—a leader, teacher, mentor, friend, and valued prophetic voice in our midst. We wanted to know,

from the only living person who was there, what had happened that night—and why. And we wanted him to know something of what he had taken from us.

When they reported to us at our annual deaconess conference, our two representatives described the change that had happened inside of them during this several-year process. At first, they said, when they communicated through their mediator, they would only refer to the offender by his prison identification number. Later he was an inmate, with a last name. Eventually, they were able to call him by his first name.



Their sense of loss and deep grief did not go away, but they gradually began to care for this man. When he finally agreed to meet them in person, they came with forgiving hearts and hope for healing. As their conversation progressed, their anger and resentment miraculously melted away. They never would have imagined that their meeting would end with an embrace after they laid hands on him and blessed him. The Holy Spirit had been at work, and everyone in the room felt the power of forgiveness.

Not every story ends this way. In fact, this story has not ended. Yes, the mediation process is over, but the process of forgiveness continues. Humanly speaking, there is no “forgive and forget.” The best we can do is to forgive and remember it is forgiven. And the question remains: Can the offender forgive himself?

### **We all need forgiveness**

What St. Paul wrote is true: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” (Romans 3:23). That is why when we gather for worship we regularly join in confession of the ways we have harmed God, one another, and the whole creation by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We cannot love perfectly, and even with our best intentions, we disappoint and hurt others. We all need forgiveness from God and from each other—over and over again.

But we all need forgiveness in another way as well. We all need to be forgiving. This isn’t *need* in the sense of *ought* or *should*; rather it is need in the sense of *basic requirement for whole and healthy living*. It’s a need like breathing and eating. When we read the stories of creation in Genesis, we realize that we are not meant to be alone. Human beings are made for relationship. When our relationships are broken, forgiveness is the way we reclaim the Creator’s intention for us.

Restoration of relationship is behind Jesus’ admonitions to forgive—even “seventy times seven.” Jesus’ fervent prayer before his arrest and crucifixion was that

all may be one. St. Paul knew that Christian communities cannot survive without a Spirit of “forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32). From baptism onward, we say, we live in the forgiveness of sins. That not only means being forgiven; it also means being forgiving.

That forgiveness is a basic human need has been demonstrated even through scientific studies. People who are forgiving, when compared with those who are not, evidence many positive results. For example, they have lower blood pressure, have fewer physical complaints, report being happier and more hopeful, have more self-confidence, are more productive and even live longer. Walking the path of forgiveness is beneficial to our mental and physical well-being, and it improves our relationships.

### **Necessary, not easy**

Forgiveness is not easy. When someone hurts us, there is often another force at work also—a desire to strike back, to hurt the one who has harmed us. Seeking revenge or retaliation catches us in a vicious cycle of more and more pain. Withholding forgiveness can be a way we seek to punish someone, but we soon learn that even that hurts us. We become resentful, bitter, unkind, hard-hearted. We remain stuck in the past and are unable to move into the future.

How then can we walk the path of forgiveness? We believe that the Spirit of the risen Christ is at work in us. That is the promise of baptism. We are, in Christ, a new creation—made for relationship with God and one another regardless of the brokenness we may experience. The Spirit invites us into fullness of life, and the Spirit gives us the courage to step onto the path of forgiveness.

Jesus, who prayed for forgiveness for those responsible for his crucifixion, has shown us the way.

It may be helpful to remind ourselves of some things that forgiveness is not:



Forgiveness is not forgetting the harm that has been done to us. God may be able to remember our sins no more, but we are not able to forgive and forget. The best we can do is to forgive and remember that it is forgiven.

Forgiveness is not condoning injustice or the wrong that has been done. Forgiveness requires acknowledging what has been done. The perpetrator may still have to suffer the consequences of their action. Someone has pointed out that the thief on the cross received Jesus' forgiveness, but he still died for his crimes.

Forgiveness does not mean denying hurt, minimizing pain or ignoring our feelings. Forgiveness can only happen when we speak the truth about our pain and name our feelings. That truth-telling may or may not be in the presence of the one who has hurt us.

Forgiveness does not require the one who wronged us to repent and feel remorse or ask for our forgiveness. Sometime the wrong-doer is not available to us because of death or other reasons. Sometimes the one who harmed us is unrepentant. If we wait for an apology or a request for forgiveness, we may remain stuck forever.

Forgiveness is not for the sake of the offender but for our own sake. We forgive in order to be free from bondage to past hurts and to be released for a better life going forward.

Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation with the offender. Reconciliation is a two-way street. Both parties need to be ready for it. All we can do is clean up our side of the street. We cannot dictate or control what happens inside the other person. In some cases, it may not be safe to have the one who has harmed us back in our life.

Forgiveness is not a quick, one-time act. It is a process that takes as long as it takes. The process is different for every person and cannot be forced.

To become forgiving is to enter into a way of life that includes forgiveness in the face of life's big injustices and little slights.

### It's a process

When we choose the path of forgiveness, we are beginning a process. It may feel risky because we are opening ourselves to the movement of the Spirit, and we cannot predict where the Spirit will lead us. We do well to remember that we are responding to God's invitation, and God loves us, forgives us, and desires for us fullness of life. To walk this path is a journey of prayer. God is there communing with us and wishing to communicate with us every step of the way. We will ask again and again for openness to the Spirit who is at work in us—leading, guiding, encouraging, and comforting.

Depending on the circumstances and our own needs and personality, we may begin this process in solitude and quiet meditation, or writing in a journal, or we may wish to talk with a trusted friend, a spiritual guide/director, counselor, pastor, or a small supportive group. The first step is to tell the story of what we have experienced as factually and truthfully as we can. Second, we identify the feelings we have, the hurt we experienced, and the loss we grieve. Here it is important to remember that no feeling is wrong. It may be helpful to take time to acknowledge anything that we have contributed to the broken relationship. (In instances of abuse, and most especially child abuse, it is important that people not blame themselves for what has been done to them.)

The next step is to move to forgiveness. This step may come quickly or it may take time. It begins by desiring not to be trapped in the endless telling of our story and naming the hurt. It continues with our seeing the offender as one who shares humanity with us. We may even come to a point of empathizing with those who have hurt us, being able to see at least a little bit of their story that has brought them to a place of harming us. This does not excuse what they have done, but it may help us move closer to seeing that we all belong to the same human family—the family in which all sin and fall short of the glory of God.



"I forgive you." These words are simple but sometimes very hard to say and even harder to mean. We may begin to say the words even before our meaning them has fully arrived. If so, we are essentially speaking our intention to move closer and closer to meaning the words.

How do we know when we have really forgiven someone? The answer varies from person to person and situation to situation. We may notice that we no longer have the same physical reaction when we see the offender or speak about them. We may feel that a weight has been lifted from our shoulders. We may experience a sense of peace. We may find ourselves praying for the well-being of the one who has harmed us. We may be free of preoccupation with our story of hurt and finally be able to tell a new story. We may feel like a new creation. We may sense that we are seeing things a little as if from God's eyes.

Sometimes there can also be reconciliation, a knitting back together of a relationship that has been broken. In that instance, it is not a matter of going back to the way things were before; rather it is building a renewed relationship out of the pain and the forgiveness. At other times, reconciliation is not possible because it is dangerous or because the other party is unwilling. Then we have the opportunity to release the relationship, to let it go. As in all the steps along the path of forgiveness, it may take time to come to a place of reconciliation or release. It is important to allow ourselves to move at our own pace until we can feel free.

When we walk the path of forgiveness, we tap into something deep within us—our basic human need to be in relationship with others. We join in Jesus' prayer that all may be one. We become more whole, and we help make the world a better place. 🌸

**E. Louise Williams**, Valparaiso, Ind., a retired deaconess, teaches at Valparaiso University, leads retreats, speaks and writes about spirituality and the diaconate, and accompanies a few people who come to her for spiritual direction.

**www.Spiritualityandpractice.com.** On this website Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat offer a plethora of resources for your spiritual journey. On the right side of the home page is a listing of a variety of spiritual practices including "forgiveness." Clicking on that link takes the reader to resources including book reviews, quotes, spiritual exercises, and video clips. Twice they have offered an e-course on forgiveness.

***The Book for Forgiving*** by Desmond Tutu with Mpho Tutu. Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu was chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa where he modeled a new way for a nation to move forward after suffering civil conflict and oppression. He believes that forgiveness not only heals individuals, but is the path for healing our world. His daughter Mpho is an Anglican priest who has studied forgiveness extensively. Together they offer practical suggestions for walking the path of forgiveness.

***Forgive for Good*** by Dr. Fred Luskin. Luskin is a counselor and health psychologist who has done extensive research in forgiveness. Some of his findings are summarized in the book. He has appeared on PBS and offers workshops on forgiveness. He offers a way to move from grudge-holding and resentment to forgiveness. The website for his project is [www.learningtoforgive.com](http://www.learningtoforgive.com).

**Forgiveness Project** ([www.theforgivenessproject.com](http://www.theforgivenessproject.com)) uses the real stories of victims and perpetrators to explore concepts of forgiveness, and to encourage people to consider alternatives to resentment, retaliation, and revenge. The site includes many stories of forgiveness from around the world.



# THE AWE-FUL TRUTH by Marguerite Rourk





ten! Give the man a 10!  
Perfect score! He did it: broke every  
one of the BIG TEN! Ogling where  
he had no business even looking,

## KING DAVID

*put himself before the Holy One, taking  
abuse of power to a whole new level and  
willingly bowing to his own lust god;*

*defiled the name of God who chose him  
to be anointed as king, exercising his  
own "divine right" to do as he pleased;*

*dishonored not just the Sabbath, but  
every day of creation, usurping the holy  
gift of time to further his own ends by  
trying to conceal his abuse;*

*desecrated his parental and family honor;*

*killed an innocent woman's hope and  
spirit—and murdered her husband  
(well, sometimes collateral damage  
happens, you know);*

*revealed and embraced a new dimension  
in take-no-prisoners adultery (tsk—such  
an arcane, inconvenient term);*

*stole another's life and then his wife,  
raping her in the bargain (she could  
hardly tell the king "Not today, sire,  
I have a headache");*

*lied and conspired to cover up his  
murderous plot, betraying his loyal  
general and friend;*

*and coveted pretty much whatever did  
not belong to him.*

This story has fascinated Jews and Christians alike for hundreds of centuries because of David's colossal me-ism and the magnitude of its consequences. Surely if ever there were a total rotter totally unworthy and undeserving of any forgiveness, David was it.

And yet, it happened. The impossible, the inconceivable, the when-hell-freezes-over happened all because our impossible, inconceivable, hell-freezing-over God opened the door to forgiveness. Through that persistent, if annoying, prophet Nathan, the Holy One offered forgiveness and reconciliation. Mind you, it took Nathan a lot of time, a clever but appalling little parable, and even more patience to get the point across. King David may well have been a military strategy genius, but he was a slow study concerning this personal situation, so Nathan had to get in his face and spell it out for him: *You are the man.*

That was not all: for the next eight verses (2 Samuel 12:7b–14), Nathan rails at David, beginning with the fearsome words that were the very mark of a prophet—*Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel.* God and Nathan meant business, and David knew it. There ensue awful curses, appropriate retribution for one chosen and anointed king over Israel, yet whose egregious sin more than merited a prophetic rant. In verse 13 near the end of Nathan's diatribe, David finally confesses: "I have sinned against the Lord." The prophet did graciously convey to David that "the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die."

But Nathan was not finished: There were dreadful wages to be paid for that sin. This portion of the king/prophet encounter closes with a marvelously terse statement: *Then Nathan went to his house.* The latter part of the story follows, of course, but David now knows just Who is The King and who is merely a king. Big difference.

WOW.



## AMAZING GRACE

This entire story now begs questions: *How is such forgiveness even possible? How does such forgiveness even exist?* Some would say David lucked out, escaping yet another close call with his life intact. Others might say that he lived to learn more of God's mercy, or that he was allowed to live for many more years because Messiah was to come from his line. But any of that is just so much peripheral musing. The truth is that such forgiveness is possible only because of the immeasurable, unknowable depths of God's love for creation and for every one of us, all of which is, quite simply, a miracle.

It must be remembered that this miracle was neither new with nor unique to David. From before creation, the whole of the holy intention—from which emanate all other characteristics constitutive of God—is love. In Hebrew scripture the word for God's constant and abiding love is *chesed*, best translated as the *lovingkindness* or all-encompassing loving mercy of God. All Scripture is exposition on God's *chesed*, that aggressive, glorious, endless love for us. Since creation, the Holy One has been inexplicably yet utterly besotted with us. God not only *has*, God *is* total love for us, and in turn we are to live *chesed* to and for God. *Chesed* is a reciprocal deal: God loves us, no strings attached, because that's the way God is, and we love God, no strings attached, because that's the way God wants it. We are so absolutely infused with such amazing grace that, as the grand old Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, our "chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever."

Stiff-necked, self-absorbed, pig-headed creatures that we are, God is still not willing to lose one of us, not even when we plot to engineer our own escape, lost in our self-determined maps and plans. Go figure. That's just how God's love works. For us to live *chesed*, we are to love God so completely that we never forsake God's service for any reason. How we are to live *chesed* is clearly laid out for us in Matthew 25:31–40. We are to feed, give drink, clothe, welcome, tend, comfort, and

visit. It's not complicated: no footnotes, fine print, loopholes, exceptions, exemptions, or eligibility clauses. We just do it because that's the way we live God's love. In the third century, Rabbi Simon the Righteous (he must have been a really good guy!) wrote "The world rests upon three things: Torah (God's Word), service to God, and bestowing kindness." Eight centuries later it was written in the Talmud that "The Torah begins with *chesed* and ends with *chesed*." And so it does.

## FORGIVENESS

God's love for us is covenant love. In chapter 31:31–34 the prophet Jeremiah speaks God's word to God's people: *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people, ...for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

This is the only place in all of Hebrew scripture where "new" and "covenant" are written together. God thinks up covenants and in *chesed* makes us partners with the Holy Self.

As if that were not awesome enough, God invites us to live in covenant relationship with the "maker...of all things, seen and unseen." Part and parcel of living in covenant relationship with God is *teshuva*, the ancient Hebrew concept of forgiveness and reconciliation. *Teshuva* is "Amazing Grace," "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," "A Mighty Fortress," and "Sweet Hour of Prayer" all wrapped up together.

God's love, *chesed*, is the ground of *teshuva*. *Teshuva* means to return, as in return to God's way from seeking our own way (that is, sin). Like love, *teshuva* is "a many-splendored thing." The very concept is a miracle. *Teshuva*, turning back to God, begins with acknowledging one's wrongdoings, regretting the wrongs of thought, word, and deed, and resolving to change one's



*Teshuva* involves and requires retribution for wrongs or, in whatever way possible, to reverse the harmful effects of the wrongs. *Teshuva* is the path to forgiveness and reconciliation with God because God thought it up and constantly extends it to us, simply because that is God's Plan A. There is no Plan B.

Even amid the grace-flood of *chesed* and *teshuva*, however, we can never forget, or ignore as David did, that our actions have consequences, many of which are beyond our control. As Carol LaHurd states in her wonderful Bible study session, "Whatever the arena for repentance and forgiveness, we Christians are called to turn our hearts and minds back to God and to reconcile ourselves with God and with our fellow creatures." Of course, the reconciling is God's doing. For us *teshuva* is acknowledging, confessing, repenting, regretting, and seeking reconciliation. We do the turning and the longing and the praying for the grace, the faithfulness, the fellowship, for the blessedness and peace, and for our Lord Jesus Christ to give us his strength so that we might "have oft escaped the tempter's snare" and walk with him across that "field victorious" ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God").

### THE LORD'S PRAYER

But here's the catch: we are commanded to forgive. Remember the part in the Lord's Prayer about "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"? We actually ask—no, we demand—that God *forgive us the same way we forgive others*. Do we really want to pray that? Sneaky old Jesus just slid that little petition right on into the prayer. Following Jesus has baggage. Our Lord made it abundantly clear that we are to live amongst our neighbors (that would be everybody else in the world) the same way we live with God. Jesus expects us always to act toward others the way we want God to act toward us. Yes, he does, and no, we can't, not by our own strength. But our merciful Lord knows

us do exactly that—to forgive as we are forgiven.

Remember that stiff-necked, pig-headed bit a few paragraphs back? Yeah, well, that's what makes it hard for us to forgive, but Jesus knows all about that, too, and he even helps us with forgiveness. Because of *chesed* and *teshuva*, we can be forgiven, and we can forgive those who have wronged us even if they do not acknowledge having sinned against us. Doesn't matter. Remember that in *chesed*, God forgives us those sins we know about and confess and also forgives us those sins that never even crossed our tiny little minds. Oh, Blessed Assurance!

Rejoice and take heart, dear friends in Christ, for even with all this discussion of forgiveness and forgiving of sins, "sinner" is not our identity. Sinner is not who I am or who you are. It wasn't who David was either. Our identity is "Child of God."

Each of us is made in God's own image, and sin cannot ever erase or negate our *imago-Dei*-ness. Sin can only soil the image and make it messy, the same way dust and dirt can obscure the value and beauty of a fine work of art. Because of *chesed* we can be cleaned up. Because of *teshuva*, we can live *imago Dei*. Jesus said so. Created in God's image, we are bought and paid for, forgiven and completely restored. Big-time sinner King David was forgiven. Nathan helped him remember God's *chesed* and live anew in *teshuva*. God does that for us, every one of us every moment of every day.

In the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, forgiveness and reconciliation is the holy will for us. In the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, we live the New Covenant—our iniquities forgiven, our sins remembered no more. Ever. 🌸

**The Rev. Dr. Marguerite M. Rourk** lives in Portland, Ore., where she serves the Oregon Synod as an interim pastor. She shares her life with David, her husband of 45 years, their sons, Edwin of Portland and Matthew of Asheville, N.C., The Incomparable Grandson Tiernan, a cat named Pig and two ferrets. The ferrets are still in charge.



# RECONCILIATION

## ~ AND THE RIVER OF LIFE ~

by Liv Larson Andrews

We pulled into the parking lot of a gas station along the Columbia River, passing by a stand selling Coke and fry-bread. Ponderosa pines gave shade to picnic tables in an adjacent campground. It was a sunny, warm August day. Sunlight danced on the water as people swam. But we didn't come there to fill up the car or swim in the river. We came to pray.

In *Reconciling All Things*, Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice propose that, "the first language of the church in a deeply broken world is not strategy, but prayer." Reconciliation is both the goal and the means of the Christian life. We are called in baptism to join the risen Christ in the "ministry of reconciliation" as Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians. And, the image of God's reign on earth is of cosmic reconciliation, when everything is restored and all brokenness has been healed. Reconciliation is both the end of the road and the journey along it. While we yet await the fullness of Revelation 22 to break in upon our world, we work toward that vision as the baptized people. Our call is not to separate

ourselves from the broken world and wait. We are sent back into the world as servants of the reconciling risen Christ.

My family added three pale faces to the crowd that journeyed to come together that day in August. Most others were Spokane, Colville, Yakima, and Okanagan tribespeople. A few members of the Lummi tribe from the Washington coast came. I was the only person in a clergy collar. A kind man asked if I had been in an accident (and so wearing a neck brace). I explained, but wondered later whether a more full and honest reply might have been to say yes, and confess my complicit involvement in the generations of "accidents" and intentional hurts waged on the tribal peoples of the Northwest. The particular brokenness that called together the prayerful group that day was the story of the river: pollution, poverty, degradation, and the disappearance of salmon.

Elders spoke of homeland and sacred sites flooded over by the building of the Grand Coulee







and Chief Joseph dams. The Columbia River Treaty of 1964, signed by the United States and Canada, made no effort to consult tribes or first nation peoples. There were no provisions for the thousands of families made homeless, crop-less and salmon-less nearly overnight. Fish had provided 70 percent of food energy for several tribes. It has been close to impossible for these cultures and communities to recover. Their White neighbors often do not know that history, nor do they wish to hear it. Standing in the sun, I discover—or remember—how my story is tangled up in theirs.

### Vision

One element of our faith story as Christians is the beautiful, wild vision of healing in the Book of Revelation. At its culmination, a gleaming city is restored and given to humanity. All creation is healed, and humanity dwells with God on earth in a cosmic dance. Right in the middle of this reconciled world is a river and a tree. The river is the water of life. The tree grows leaves “for the healing of the nations.” No pollution or poverty. No weeping or worry. I think my tribal neighbors would see thousands of salmon jumping upstream in this vision of restoration.

How do we travel the journey from the little campground to the tree of life? Katangole and Rice offer up stories and practices regarding the hard work of reconciliation. Born from their lived experiences in Uganda and Mississippi, they observe things that get in the way of real reconciliation: speed, distance, and innocence. We can’t pretend that this work—reconciling—is going to go quickly. We can’t go about it from a safe distance, and we can’t just get up and leave when it gets tough. Hardest of all, we can’t pretend we aren’t culpable.

Lament is one practice they suggest can help us unlearn these hindrances. Lament, crying out of our pain, crying to God, does not obey our preferences for processes that move along on schedule. We must slow down to hear our neighbor’s cries. Lament does

not allow us to remain at arm’s length, either. We draw near to weep with those who weep. And it will not leave us squeaky clean, for when we honestly look at the brokenness in human systems, we see more acutely the brokenness within us.

Joni Mitchell sings plaintively, “I wish I had a river I could skate away on.” In her song, “River,” “it’s coming on Christmas. They’re cuttin’ down trees, putting up reindeer, and singin’ songs of joy and peace.” But her inner pain and guilt prevent her from joining in. She wants to flee. Now it is January, and for many of us there is frozen water nearby for skating and ice fishing. Once we celebrate Epiphany, we’ll pack up the happy signs of Christmas. But back in that August sun, I had moments of wishing for an escape route much like a frozen river. When the stories of pain and loss became vivid, when I could see real tears, and when I learned how callous our nation’s leaders had been—and often still are with regard to tribal peoples—I lost my ability to be an innocent observer. Feeling that innocence melt away, I immediately wanted to be somewhere else.

### Brokenness

There’s no running away in Revelation, in the vision of creation restored, the vision to which we are called in baptism. What is so striking, actually, is that God runs *to* the earth. The author of the vision sees “a new heaven and a new earth... and the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.” A voice from the throne says, “see, the home of God is among mortals... God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” The Lamb, the symbol of the risen Christ, dwells in the redeemed city with all of humanity. In this image of reconciliation fully revealed, God is hanging out with all of God’s people. The work of reconciliation is messy and hard. Yet we can risk getting messy because the risen Christ is already among us, reconciling, healing, and mending.



In his book, *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop writes, "Americans have used wealth and technology to invent and secure places of minimal conflict." Creating closed social media groups, participating in clubs of like-minded people, and even shopping online lowers the potential for encountering those that are different from us. If we have the means, we tend to smooth our lives out so our way through life is easier. This is the opposite of Revelation 22, and the opposite of our call in baptism. If reconciliation is both the journey and the journey's end, the way we live now matters.

The risen Christ empowers us to risk having our lives troubled by the recognition of our brokenness. When we keep to safe, small arenas of interaction, we miss the work of reconciliation happening all around us through the presence of Jesus.

Too often, even our churches are places of homogeneity, places of minimal conflict not because we've worked so hard on peacemaking but because we don't talk about our differences. What would it look like to welcome a notion of church life that embraces conflict or difference? What could it mean to radically trust the risen Christ to be present in the midst of difficult conversations about broken places in our communities?

## Unity

A bell rang rhythmically as two men sang. Speakers greeted the crowd in a language I did not know. A woman led us in singing "Amazing Grace," first in Salish, then in English. I stood up and shared about the rite of baptism being a call to love all water. When the time came to bless the meal of freshly grilled Chinook salmon and local corn, we spoke a common Catholic table prayer and many people crossed themselves. We beheld a moment of unity amid all our difference in the common act of prayer. It was a tiny glimmer of Revelation 22. If I had run away or kept my distance, I would never have beheld it.

Maybe you sing "Amazing Grace" on Sunday

mornings. Maybe you also sing like Joni Mitchell, plaintive and regretful. Martin Luther weaves from lament back to grace in his hymn, "Out of the Depths I Cry to You" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 600). It is one of my favorites for the way Luther describes the nearness with which God's mercy has come to us, down to our very flesh:

"In you alone, O God, we hope and not in our own merit. We rest our fears in your good word and trust your Holy Spirit. Your promise keeps us strong and sure. We trust the cross your signature inscribed upon our temples."

We can't go about the challenging work of reconciliation with our own merit in mind. With our desire for speedy solutions or our need to remain aloof, we often get in the way. Luther points to where we can lay our impediments, along with our fears that we can't reconcile: at the foot of the cross. Revelation's tree of life is not a distant, future reality. Rather, it has drawn near to us. It is the cross of Jesus. Its sign is on our bodies. Through it, God has already redeemed the world. Under its branches, with its blessing on our temples, we enter into God's reconciling activity here and now.

It seems pretty likely that the Columbia River will live longer than I do. It is a long river with a long history. My time along its banks was short that day in August, but now that I have prayed with my neighbors, watched the sun dance over the surface of the water, and tasted the salmon so deeply missed by tribal peoples, I know I am tangled up in the story of the Columbia. I remember that I am called to work for its health and for the health of those living around it.

Now, having been watered and fed, my work, and our work wherever we are, is both to witness and participate in the long story of God reconciling the world, one river at a time. 🌿

The Rev. Liv Larson Andrews is the pastor of Salem Lutheran in Spokane, Wash. She lives with her husband and young son, and dreams of hosting a lectionary-based cooking show.







# SAFE at HOME

by Gwen Sayler

Although I've lived away from my parents' home many more years than I lived in it, I have an ongoing nostalgic desire to return to it. This desire is so strong that whenever the house comes up for sale, I have to fight the urge to buy it even though it is in North Dakota, and I happily live in Iowa. Since it was up for sale again this past summer when I was in the state visiting family, my sister-in-law and I went for a realtor's tour. I remember the house as large, well-built and beautiful, a safe space where my parents loved my brother and me unconditionally and encouraged us to dream big dreams. Surrounded on each side by salt of the earth neighbors, it truly was a wonderful place.

Happy idealized memories gave way to present reality even before the tour officially began. The yard was a mess, and the neighboring houses derelict and in need of demolition. Rooms seemed so much smaller and more awkwardly arranged than I remembered, and most windows badly needed to be replaced. But most importantly, I no longer sensed there the presence of my parents, both of whom died 30 years ago. Facing reality at last, I finally was able to let go of my desire to go back and re-create what I had remembered.

Thanks be to God, I am able to cherish warm, albeit idealized, memories of the place where I was raised. Unfortunately, that is not the case for everyone. Abused sexually, ritually, and mentally in her child-

hood home, a friend of mine remains unable to feel safe in any home, including the house in which she has lived for many years. For her, terror lurks everywhere. No space is truly safe.

## Covering his tracks

The Bible study for this month takes us into a royal house—King David's home—that should have been a safe space, but was not (2 Samuel 11). Seeing Bathsheba bathing naked on the roof of her house while he is walking on the roof of his, David sends for her, takes her into his house, and has sex with her while her soldier husband is out fighting David's battles. Since the text explicitly states that Bathsheba is cleansing herself after her menstrual cycle, it is clear to the reader that David will be the father of the child conceived as a result of David's action.

Trying to cover his tracks, David has Uriah brought home from the front and unsuccessfully tries to persuade him to spend the night in his own house with his own wife. When Uriah refuses, citing loyalty to his brothers fighting in the field, David orchestrates a series of events resulting in Uriah's death at the front line.

After allowing Bathsheba time to mourn her husband in her own house, David has her brought to his, where she remains for the rest of her life. The child conceived in the royal house is born there and dies



soon thereafter—a sad ending to a sordid story. Scholars, artists, and general readers long have puzzled over this troubling text. On the one hand, as becomes clear in the prophet Nathan’s subsequent parable (2 Samuel 12:1–5), David clearly is guilty of adultery. But, the argument has raged over the centuries, to what degree was it his fault? Did Bathsheba “ask for it” by bathing nude on the roof of her house at the precise time David was walking on his?

The answer, often given by male interpreters of earlier generations, was that indeed David was the innocent victim and Bathsheba the calculating perpetrator who consciously set out to trap him.

### Turning point

The Bible is clear that David was a great king. Many of us have warm memories of stories of his heroism first told to us as children. From these stories, we may have constructed an ideal picture of David as the king who could do no wrong and may, like those early interpreters, conclude that his many contributions far outweigh his one little slip. We can forgive and forget.

Although we may try to cling to an idealized David, the Bible does not. 2 Samuel 11 marks the turning point in David’s career. Prior to the chapter, David is on the rise. All he does succeeds brilliantly.

Beginning with 2 Samuel 12, however, things spiral downhill for him and everyone even remotely connected to him. One son rapes a sister and is killed by another son, who later leads a revolt against David. No one will be safe in the royal home any longer. Eventually, David dies a confused, impotent old man attended by a virgin whose only task is to keep him warm (1 Kings 1).

What makes the events of 2 Samuel 11 so significant, as Nathan’s parable makes clear (2 Samuel 12), is the abuse of power by the king. David had power; Bathsheba’s husband Uriah did not. David took what he wanted; Uriah died as a result. Demonstrating the incredible pride that seems to accompany incredible

power, David had no qualms about taking what was not his. For this, God holds him accountable.

### Abuse of power

Lost in Nathan’s explanation of the parable is any consideration of the abuse suffered by Bathsheba. In ancient times, females were considered property first of their fathers and then of their husbands. Within that worldview, Bathsheba simply was “collateral damage” in the wrong perpetuated by one man against another.

Our worldview, fortunately, is different. After generations of struggle, women are considered full human beings in their own right. Within our worldview, David committed sexual abuse against Bathsheba as well as his crime against Uriah. He had no more right to take Bathsheba than he did to have Uriah killed. In both instances, he abused his power as king.

But what if Bathsheba welcomed David’s advances? Or, beyond enjoying unplanned sex with David, what if she set out to seduce him by appearing nude on the roof of her house as he was walking on the roof of his? Could it have been as much her fault as his?

These often-asked questions miss the core of what sexual abuse is all about and illustrate the common tendency to blame the victim. Sexual abuse is about power, power that King David had and commoner Bathsheba did not. The vulnerable one is not the responsible party. David had no right to take Bathsheba. He, not she, is accountable for the abuse perpetrated against her.

And what about Bathsheba? How did she fare in the aftermath of David’s sex with her? We know very little about her life after she was taken into David’s house with his other wives.

It was in that house that David’s decision to have sex with her began the sequence of events leading to her husband’s death, and in that house that the son born to her through David died. Could she ever have felt safe there or any place else for that matter? Or, did she spend



the rest of her life repressing or reliving the terror of the trauma she had endured? We simply do not know.

### Blaming themselves

And so it is with sexual abuse today. Partners justify abusing their partners, blaming the victim for whatever fails the abuser. For the victim, home is no longer safe. Adults abused as children often live in repressed fear that no place is or ever will be a totally safe place for them. Bearing scars remain long after the abuse has occurred.

The statistics are staggering. As many as one in three girls and one in seven boys will be sexually abused in their childhood. Somewhere in the United States, another woman is raped every two minutes, and annually an estimated 1.3 million women are victims of sexual assault by an intimate partner. David's abuse of power gets repeated again and again and again.

We all long somewhat nostalgically to live in a home that is safe and secure for us and those we love, a home where all are loved, boundaries are clear, and no one ever is hurt. That is a wonderful ideal. However, it is not reality. Reality is messy and sometimes ugly. The need to protect David from the charge of "abuser" reflects the deep-seated desire to hold on to the ideal by ignoring the messiness the Bible exposes in order to call us to address it. We don't want to think of someone we respect or even love as an abuser, so we try to protect him or her either by denying the abuse took place or by blaming the victim.

The power of the ideal affects victims as well as abusers and bystanders. Loving the ideal picture they may have of their partner, victims of domestic violence often blame themselves for the abuse. Or, they see themselves as worthless, blemished beyond repair.

Only when they are ready to name and face the abuse for what it is are they in a place where healing can begin. For victims, healing is a process that works on its own timetable, a process that cannot be rushed by imperatives to "just leave him" or "forgive and forget."

### Beacon of hope

Far from protecting us from the messiness of life, the Bible exposes it, calling us to acknowledge reality as it is and to respond faithfully in our context. Confronting abusers with God's judgment against their abuse of power, the Bible challenges bystanders to let go of the blinders shielding them from seeing abuse when it happens and to respond appropriately. The response may take a variety of forms—perhaps reporting the abuser to the authorities, particularly if the abused are children, or offering to travel with the victim on her/his journey through the abuse. While it includes helping the victim see what resources are available for assistance, it does not involve telling the victim what to do. That would be re-victimizing the victim by denying her/him the freedom to make his/her own decision.

For those who have suffered abuse, Bathsheba's story is a beacon of hope. In a world where so many deny or minimize abuse, the Bible names the abuse of power for the crime it is. Moreover, "victim" is not the Bible's last word on Bathsheba. Her name re-appears in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, where she is listed as an ancestress of our Lord. The God who calls us to face reality did not let her go. Bathsheba remained safe within God's embrace, a survivor whose story of victimization and healing takes its place in the procession of stories of ancestors through whom God sent Jesus to be Immanuel—"God with us"—for us and in us always.

Reflecting his own victimization at the hand of others, the author of Psalm 119:54 none-the-less confidently states "Your statutes have been my song wherever I make my home." Perhaps in light of Bathsheba's story we can paraphrase that conviction to say "God's Word of accountability, healing, and hope is my song, and in God's ongoing presence with me in all times, whatever my reality, there I make my home." 🌸

**Gwen Sayler** teaches Bible at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, and is a proud member of the Valpo Deaconess Class of '71.





# REPENT AND FORGIVE

TRANSFORMING LIFE AND FAITH by Carol Schersten LaHurd

## Theme verse

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” Psalm 51:10

## Opening hymn

“Out of the Depths I Cry to You” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 600) “Healer of Our Every Ill” in (*ELW* 612).

## Overview

From the story of King David’s grave sins against Bathsheba, Uriah, and God, and his eventual repentance and forgiveness, we go on to explore forgiveness in Luke and Acts. The passages will help us reflect on what it means to turn our hearts back to God to receive forgiveness and learn to forgive others.

## The force of forgiveness

A national reconciliation day? That was the proposal of the late advice columnist Ann Landers (Eppie Lederer) more than 20 years ago in response to a 1989 reader’s letter about estrangement. The writer mentioned lifelong friends she no longer spoke to and close relatives who had not been in contact for five years. The letter-writer’s suggestion: a “Reconciliation Day” during which people would phone or write letters to restore relationships—and would agree to accept the peace offerings of others. A few years later, Landers declared April 2 as annual Reconciliation Day, and she

later reported that thousands of readers had written to say they had followed her advice. Ironically, Landers (born in 1918) was for five years estranged from her own twin sister Pauline Phillips. Phillips, using the pen name Abigail Van Buren, had her own advice column, “Dear Abby,” in *The San Francisco Chronicle* and syndicated nationally.

Most of us can think of family members who cling for years to resentment over an actual or perceived wrong: a forgotten birthday, disagreement about how to care for an elderly parent, failure to repay a loan, or the distribution of an estate. Some people are able eventually to exchange words of forgiveness and to resume a close relationship; many others are not. (See “With God’s Grace,” p. 5.) Forgiveness is an even more complex topic when we consider our relationships as sinners before God—or the possible responses by people who have experienced great injury, such as the death of a loved one struck by a drunk driver. This month we will read about the multiple sins of one of the Bible’s greatest leaders King David and about his process of repentance and the long-term consequences of both his sin and God’s forgiveness.

## A king abuses his power

The book of 1 Samuel recounts how the judge and prophet Samuel chose Saul to be the first king of the Israelites. After years of flawed and even sinful leader-



ship by Saul, at God's direction, Samuel anointed the young man David to be Saul's successor. War with the Philistines and contention over the throne followed. Proving himself to be a strong warrior and wily leader, David prevailed over his rivals and was anointed king of Israel by all the tribal elders (2 Samuel 5). For seven years he ruled from Hebron and then moved his capital to Jerusalem, from which he ruled all of the Israelite territory for 33 more years. Accounts of his military victories in 2 Samuel serve as a frame around the story of his grave sins against Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah the Hittite, and against God. Yet the writers had great esteem for David. One sign is this summary: "So David reigned over all Israel; and David administered justice and equity to all his people" (2 Samuel 8:15).

1. **READ 2 SAMUEL 11:1–27** and list all the ways David sins. How do you react to the portrayals of David and Bathsheba? What information do we get from 2 Samuel? What more would you like to know?

Second Samuel gives us a very spare account of David's act of adultery with Bathsheba. We know that the roofs of houses in biblical Israel (and still in that region today) served as extra living space. We can guess that David's residence was the highest in the city, so he could look down on a neighboring roof that otherwise would have been shielded from onlookers. What we are not told is anything about Bathsheba's feelings as a subject commanded to come to the king's bed and who found herself pregnant as a result. It is interesting that over the centuries many interpreters have assumed that Bathsheba was a willing participant in this liaison—even without evidence in the text itself. What we are told is that she mourned for her dead husband, presumably not knowing that David had arranged his death (2 Samuel 11:26). So, we might ask, if Bathsheba was not a willing participant, what might have motivated her to go along with David's demands? How is David's putting

her in this position part of his sin? (See "Safe at Home," p. 26.) Notice the narrative details that heighten the seriousness of David's temporary lust. He happened to impregnate Bathsheba during the fertile time after her period when she would not have been having sex with her husband, Uriah, a soldier off fighting in David's army. How did David plan to remove suspicion from himself? He immediately called for Uriah and told him to return to his home—assuming that the man would sleep with his wife. Ironically, Uriah at this point was being more faithful to the Israelites' covenant with God than David. He knew he was to abstain from sex while the ark and the rest of the army were still in the field.

Even getting Uriah drunk failed to entice him to sleep with Bathsheba. Sinking deeper into the consequences of his first sin, David commanded that Uriah be positioned in the battle's most vulnerable spot, and he indeed was killed as David had planned. When the news was brought to him, David chastised the men for letting Uriah fall into harm's way, deflecting his guilt onto others.

As the story continues, we learn that David did give Bathsheba time to mourn for Uriah. But then he sent for her and made her his wife. As 2 Samuel 11:27 reports, their son was born but "the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." Then, 2 Samuel 12 opens with a visit from Nathan, one of a series of God's prophets who advised the Israelite kings.

2. **READ 2 SAMUEL 12:1–25.** What is your impression of the prophet Nathan? What is his role in the story?

Rather than directly accusing David of adultery and murder, Nathan told David a parable about a rich man who selfishly took a poor neighbor's only lamb to slaughter and cook for a visitor. David, recognizing the injustice and cruelty of the rich man, proclaimed that such a man deserved death and should repay the poor man with four new lambs. Drawn into the parable,



David needed no further evidence of his own guilt when Nathan pronounced, “You are the man!” Reread 2 Samuel 12:11–14, noting the various punishments God will deliver.

At this point in the story we may wonder at least two things: Are we capable of David’s depth of sin, and does God hand out specialized punishments still today? Even if we manage to resist the temptations of adultery and murder, David’s actions can remind us of times when our own behavior has been governed by jealousy or greed or anger. As for whether God punishes each sin, philosophers and theologians have debated for centuries. But what we can think about is the biblical warning that we will reap what we have sown (Galatians 6:7)—that our actions can have consequences, even very damaging consequences, beyond our control. (See “The Awe-ful Truth,” p. 18.)

### David repents

3. List the steps in David’s process of repentance in 2 Samuel 12. Summarize the aftermath of his sin. Why do you think the authors included this story in the Bible? What other important biblical characters served God in spite of their sinful pasts? Perhaps we normally think that bad people do bad things and good people do good things. Here is a “bad” person who goes on to do good things. What lessons can we draw from this?

Recall that in 2 Samuel 11, David took a number of steps to cover up his adultery and deceitful involvement in Uriah’s death—a dramatic betrayal of one of his soldiers. But then Nathan’s parable caused him to admit his guilt. David was told God would “put away” his sin, but that Bathsheba’s baby would die.

Understandably, David was filled with grief and begged God to save his son. Notice how David kept vigil for seven days. Notice also what David did when the baby died. He got up, washed, changed his clothes, and ate. Then David comforted his new wife, Bathsheba, and they conceived another son, Solomon, who

would become his successor as king. The story ends with David’s successful military campaign against the Ammonite city of Rabbah.

Are we supposed to think that God deliberately killed their son to punish David? What other lessons might there be in this event? What other explanations?

4. REVIEW 2 SAMUEL 11–12. Which characters do you identify with and why? What does this story reveal about gender and class relations in Israel during the monarchy period? What relevance do you see for today?

The biblical account of David and Bathsheba helps us see that both everyday people and mighty leaders are capable of terrible sins, but also of repentance and forgiveness. What 2 Samuel does not tell us much about is how Bathsheba was able to forgive David. Even though she was in many ways a victim of King David’s lust, years later she emerged as a forceful person. She and the prophet Nathan schemed together to make her son, Solomon, the strongest candidate to succeed David in the midst of intense rivalry among several of his sons.

Besides being a great ruler and military general, King David was reported to be a musician and composer of songs. Some of the Bible’s psalms are thought to have been written by him. Because of its penitential content, Psalm 51 is often associated with the David and Bathsheba story. Even if David was not the original author, its verses are helpful as we think about his process of repentance and forgiveness.

5. READ PSALM 51:1–13. Describe the steps and emotions that, in your experience, move one from guilt to repentance to forgiveness and reconciliation. How do these connect with David’s story in 2 Samuel 11–12? Think of a time when you have confessed wrongdoing and asked forgiveness from God or someone you have harmed. How did your experience compare with that of the writer of Psalm 51?



The psalms were used in Jewish worship for centuries before they were adopted by the emerging Christian church. Many psalms were hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God. But some were laments—expressions of fear, sorrow, pain, or guilt—addressed to God on behalf of an individual or the whole community. Psalm 51 is among several that are specifically classified as penitential. Even though the psalm is linked with David, it can represent the whole Israelite community's pleas to God for forgiveness.

### **Repentance and forgiveness in Luke and Acts**

The author of Luke and Acts continues the Old Testament's emphasis on repentance and forgiveness. Remember, for example, the time Jesus visited the home of a Pharisee. A sinful woman, perhaps a prostitute, interrupted the meal to weep and anoint Jesus' feet with costly oil. Against the protests of his host, Jesus welcomed the woman, forgave her sins, and told her to "go in peace" (Luke 7:36–50). Later, Jesus' words to his disciples apply to all of us: "If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive" (Luke 17:3–5). (See "As We Forgive," p. 14.) Finally, after his death and resurrection, Jesus returned to prepare his followers for his ascension and for the work they were to carry on in his name. "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem'" (Luke 24:45–47).

Jesus' ascension into heaven is described in the New Testament in two places: Luke 24 and Acts 1. In the latter, Jesus promised his followers that the Holy Spirit would come to inspire and empower them as they serve as Jesus' "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea

and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is recounted in Acts 2, and, miraculously, the many different people gathered in Jerusalem were able to hear the disciples' preaching in the "native language of each" (Acts 2:6). In a larger sense, Pentecost shows how God reaches out to us where and as we are, with all our differences. In a sense, God transforms things for us so that we can more easily be transformed.

As part of his Pentecost sermon, Peter told the crowd that these are the times foretold by the prophet Joel, when young and old, women and men, will be filled with the Spirit and will prophesy: a time when "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:17–21). After Peter shared the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the people asked him and the other disciples: "'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter replied, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him'" (Acts 2:37–39).

Acts tells us that on that day "those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added" (2:41). Shortly after these dramatic events, Peter and John healed a lame man at the gate of the Temple. Again Peter preached about Jesus and urged his fellow Jews to repent for their unwitting role in Jesus' execution, saying "And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers" (3:17). By citing ignorance as a cause and not accusing them of being evil people, Peter eased the way toward their repentance. In this he gives us a possible path to reconciliation with those who have injured us.

6. **READ ACTS 3:17–26.** What did the listeners of this sermon need to repent for? What are some ways these verses



show continuity with the stories of the children of Israel that we have seen in the Old Testament?

Peter's words in Acts 3 demonstrate the author's view that Jesus' crucifixion was both a sinful act by human beings (Jews who handed Jesus over to the Roman governor Pilate) and part of God's divine purpose for the Messiah. Significantly, Acts, along with other New Testament books, stresses the continuity between God's saving actions for the people of Israel and the sending of God's Messiah to bring blessing and salvation to all the people of the Earth.

Acts 3:19 evokes the aspect of repentance as "turning" back to God. That turning includes forgiveness and also living out the newly forgiven condition with renewed commitment to be faithful to God and God's will. The Hebrew word *shub* for "return" in Psalm 51:13 is echoed by the Greek *epistrephate* for "turn to" in Acts 3:19. In both cases, the words suggest an ongoing turning to God that results in changed attitudes and behaviors. A wife who has been psychologically abusive toward her husband may ask for forgiveness from both her spouse and God—and receive it. But her repentance is fully valid only if she strives sincerely to limit such behavior going forward.

In comparison with Luke and Acts, Paul's letters contain fewer references to forgiveness. But a passage in Romans links David and forgiveness. Paul cites Abraham as an example of someone declared righteous by God on the basis of faith and then quotes from Psalm 32: "So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin'" (Romans 4:6–8).

### Repent, forgive, reconcile!

7. READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17–20. Make a list of the various arenas where we can accept God's call to work for

reconciliation. Then, for two or three of these, write a specific example of a time when asking for or granting forgiveness led you to a restored relationship—or when you helped others to forgive each other.

A family I once knew suffered estrangement for many years over a series of rather insignificant misunderstandings. The mother and unmarried daughter, who lived together, felt resentment and refused even to celebrate holidays with the other sister and her family. Offers by the married sister to talk about the presumed offenses were resisted. Other relatives' invitations to them all to be together at larger family gatherings were rebuffed. Finally, both mother and daughter became ill. The estranged sister and her husband resolved to help them whether they wanted help or not. They simply began to deliver meals, take the dog for walks, and clean their house—asking for and expecting nothing in return. Gradually the estranged mother and daughter accepted the loving care extended to them. There was no discussion of the past hurts and resentment. Instead, the family members were able to turn back to each other in a relationship that had "become new," to use Paul's words (2 Corinthians 5:17).

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians, he likely wanted them to mend relationships within this fractious and diverse church, as well as in their families. Christian organizations and individuals throughout history have conducted "ministry of reconciliation" by facilitating negotiation among warring parties in places like El Salvador and the Sudan. Lutheran Leymah Gbowee organized Muslim and Christian women to work together to put pressure on the Liberian government and rebels to end civil violence. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu led his country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission to help all South Africans repent for the wrongs of apartheid and "become new" as a national people of all races. Sometimes, being "ambassadors for Christ" and achieving reconciliation



means that Christian groups must themselves ask for forgiveness from those they have wronged in the past. In 1999, the Roman Catholic Church and the ELCA advanced reconciliation by jointly lifting the condemnations that Catholics and Lutherans had made against each other in the post-Reformation era and by affirming the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.” In 2006 after a series of Lutheran-Mennonite dialogues, the ELCA Church Council adopted a declaration that expressed “deep and abiding sorrow and regret for the persecution and suffering visited upon Anabaptists during religious disputes of the past.”

In 1994 the ELCA adopted the “Declaration of ELCA to the Jewish Community.” Citing anti-Jewish passages in the New Testament and in the writings of Martin Luther, the declaration atones for the role of Christians in the past suffering of the Jewish people and pledges to strive for respect and understanding instead of bigotry.

Most of us will probably never be directly involved in activities on as large a scale as those described, but the role of repentance and forgiveness is no less significant for our lives. Whatever the arena for repentance and forgiveness, we Christians are called to turn our hearts and minds back to God and to reconcile ourselves with God and with our fellow creatures. (See “Reconciliation and the River of Life,” p. 22.)

### In the media

You may find additional links to help you with the study on the [gathermagazine.org](http://gathermagazine.org) Bible study webpage.

### Looking ahead

Luke and Acts describe both successful and unsuccessful examples of spiritual transformation. Next month’s session will consider the role of God’s word and of human communities in determining whether conversion is authentic and lasting.

### Closing prayer

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you (Psalm 51). 🌿

**Carol Schersten LaHurd** is a lifelong teacher. For the past 30 years, she has taught biblical studies, Islam, and interfaith relations in colleges, seminaries, the church, and the wider community. She holds a Ph.D. in New Testament from the University of Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. She is author of “Luke’s Vision: The People of God,” the 1998 Bible study for *Lutheran Woman Today* (now *Gather*).





## FAMILY MATTERS

# Final Treasures

by Sue Gamelin

## I didn't know where

to start. I stood in the living room of my parents' apartment in Florida, and looked around at everything in a way that I had never looked at it before. Mom and Dad's apartment had changed in my eyes from "home" to "project." A broken pelvis had landed Mom, 93, in the hospital. Four days later, Dad, 94, joined her there when his chronic bronchitis turned into pneumonia. Now they were recuperating, side by side in nursing-home beds in their retirement complex. Mom had announced with resolution, "I won't go back to our apartment ever again. We need more help than we can get living there." When Dad objected, expecting he could talk her out of it, she held firm. She announced that their new home would be in assisted living.

So I stood there, her words ringing in my ears. I didn't know where to start with the process of moving things dear to them into a new place with less storage, and clearing out what was left. I stood there, feeling overwhelmed.

Then I began.

I opened every closet and cupboard and drawer. I checked out the bookcases and desks. I looked under the bed and over the refrigerator. And then I sank down on the sofa in discouragement. An apartment that was a beautiful, neat and tidy place on the surface was full of things that had been tucked away here and there and everywhere. I knew why. Mom and Dad were Great Depression kids. My dad's dad raised six children on his feed mill salary. Rutabagas from

Uncle Emil's farm had been a staple. My mom's family had lost their home in the 1930s. They rented a house when they could afford it, or lived at their lakeside log cabin, with a pump in the kitchen sink, an outhouse, and a fireplace for warmth. Like many in the generation who had gone through the Depression, Mom and Dad didn't want to throw away things that "we might need someday."

What would I do with all of it? First step, call my sister and cry, "Help!"

Days and days of amazingly hard work followed. Before we dismantled anything we took pictures of their old living room so that we could replicate it as much as possible in their assisted living apartment. Then their grandchildren were asked to pick out what they wanted from what was left, and we sisters chose our treasures.

Friends who were too polite to say no were given "gifts." The library in their complex found piles of books on the donation table. We heaved trash bags full of unusables into the dumpster. We drove trunks full of stuff to Goodwill and to the thrift store down the street, stuff like the coffee pots that I found.

When I asked Mom, "Just wondering, why do you have five coffee pots?" her reply was, "Did you find the one in my clothes closet?" I found two more coffee pots there, next to Mom's shoe collection and a coal shuttle. A coal shuttle? In Florida? What on earth was that doing there, stored under her blouses? Mom couldn't remember. Finally, movers took to Mom and Dad's new, smaller place the



furniture, lamps, pictures, and clothing that would fill it.

Then the apartment was empty. Were we tired? You better believe it. One infamous day, when I was absolutely exhausted, I drove to Goodwill, leaving stacked up on the sidewalk at the retirement complex all the stuff I was intending to deliver there! The most exhausting part of this project was realizing that we were sorting through precious remnants of Mom and Dad's lives. We went to bed each night in their emptier and emptier apartment and awoke with weariness and sadness. We grieved mightily.

Our weariness was eased when Mom and Dad were wheeled into their new place in assisted living. They exclaimed with delight, "It looks just like home!" Their TV was framed by pictures arranged on the wall just as they had been in their old place. A new, single-cup coffee maker sat by their little refrigerator and microwave. A bookcase held their photo albums, WWII books, and favorite novels. Their clothes fit in the small closet. They moved gingerly from their wheelchairs into the places on their sofa and recliner where they had always sat to watch TV, and sighed with relief. Home.

It was then that I realized anew the truth that home is not a project. Home isn't bedsprads that match the drapes or dishes for all occa-

sions. It isn't a plethora of coffee pots or a drawer full of unused cocktail napkins. Home is where our hearts are, not our souvenirs or even our photo albums.

Jesus cautioned us, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in



and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19–21).

Where is Mom and Dad's treasure? Where are their hearts? Not with the coal shuttle we donated to the thrift shop. At the top of their list of treasures is each other. They regard their 72 years of marriage as a gift from God. Do they realize that they may not always have each other? Oh, yes.

The last time Mom left on a gurney pushed by paramedics, Dad assured me, "She was still alive when they took her. She smiled at me and

waved." Other treasures on their list include their two "girls" (we'll always be that) and our families. Their pastor, old friends (although many have died), and the simple pleasures of food and TV follow.

In their motorized beds at night they hold hands while Dad prays, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, Lord Jesus." They know that there are many people whose lives are lonely and whose rooms are filled with despair, though they may have fancy furniture. Mom and Dad are grateful, no matter what.

Gratitude is the final treasure, the one that makes any dwelling place a home. That is the apostle Paul's secret in Philippians 4:12: "In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

The nursing home on the first floor of their building will be the next place my sister and I will move our parents. They're fine with that. All Mom and Dad want is home—not things; not a project. They want home, both here and in one of Jesus' many dwelling places that awaits them when the time comes and Jesus takes them to himself. Me, too. 🌿

**The Rev. Sue Gamelin** is a retired ELCA pastor in North Carolina. She and her husband, Tim, have four grown children and their spouses and 10 grandchildren.





conversion becomes the light of which  
we see everything else - ourselves, the  
world around us, and our position  
in that world.

lasting conversion is not just knowledge.  
it is not apart from us, but a part of us.  
it does not drive us away from the world, leaving  
conversion can be the falling in.

a lasting conversion is a  
daily conversion.

jesus completely redefines  
conversion - it is not a one-time  
event, but a continuous process.  
conversion is not a  
single act, but a  
continuous process.

conversion is also  
a relationship with  
it because it  
is part of us.

we become vulnerable  
in commitment to the real.

conversion is not  
a one-time event,  
but a continuous process.

conversion is not the rescue of disabled spirits  
from flesh, but the transformation of the whole  
person; it must therefore take human nature into account.



# MAKING CONVERSION STICK

by Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

"I used to be neutral about this. I'm not neutral anymore."

"I never understood why it mattered so much. Then one day, it was like a light went on."

"I don't know how to describe it, other than to say that God changed my heart."

I've heard many conversion stories like this. People are converted to Christian faith (or away from it), converted on social issues like immigration or sexuality, converted like Shakespeare's character Benedick, who trailed against marriage and then fell in love. ("When I said I would die a bachelor," he backpedals to imagined critics, "I did not think I should live till I were married.")

The old way of thinking gives way to something new and different—even contradictory—with a sense of conviction that the new thing was right all along. Even my 2-year-old daughter was converted recently: absolutely certain she hated quesadillas, until she nibbled a piece when no one was looking. Her eyes widened in surprise, and an evangelist was born: "Mama, I LOVE Quesadillas! They're delicious!"

Conversion can be like falling in love: passionate, thrilling, and terrifying by turns. We discover something deeply true about the world, about ourselves, about the meaning of it all—what theologian Paul Tillich called the "ground of being" and some of us call "God." We become vulnerable, risking ourselves in commitment to the new. Little wonder that stories of conversion sometimes sound like a romance: a pivotal moment of epiphany, and "happily ever after." But what happens in that "ever after"? How does a blazing realization become a lifelong fire? What makes conversion stick?

## Finding our religion

The Lutheran story began in Martin Luther's own experience of conversion: not from one religion to another, but from futile attempts to merit salvation to the encounter with God's grace as a free, unearned gift. Luther's legacy includes the insights that conversion is an act of the Holy Spirit and that salvation is God's work in Jesus on the cross—not our intellectual work of "choosing" Jesus.

Lutheran Christians can therefore be reluctant to place external measurements on faith. Who are we to say whether conversion is genuine or lasting? No one knows what passes between God and another person. I'm one of those reluctant Lutherans; and yet, I know that I want lasting conversion for myself and others. I don't want my life to sound like the Katy Perry song, "I stood for nothing; so I fell for everything." I want the people I know and love in the church (and outside of it) to find an enduring faith in God.

In ministry and elsewhere, I have witnessed some powerful, lasting conversions. Some have been religious, and some not; some I've agreed with, and some I haven't; but these conversions have something in common: they are *relational*, *incarnational*, and *vocational*. Put another way, lasting conversion is not just knowledge, but knowing; it is not apart from us, but a part of us; it does not draw us out of this world, but sends us more deeply into it.

## Relational conversion: knowing and being known

Recently, I was reading Palmer Parker's book *Let Your Life Speak*, and I was struck by Parker's distinction



between “The God I was told about in church,” and “the God I know.” Parker is one of many Christians who have discerned a difference between knowing things about God and knowing God. The second kind, the “knowing” that comes in relationship, forms the heart of faith.

Conversion also has a relational heart. Statistics and research are important; but relationship can often transform what information can’t touch. When Lutheran churches began ordaining female clergy, vigorous study contributed to the decision; but today, when people tell me how their own minds were changed, every story involves an actual woman in ministry. “If Pastor Jane can preach like that,” they concluded, “God must want women to be pastors, after all.”

Relationship cannot replace reason, but it can enhance understanding. In the context of human relationships, our most strongly held positions are necessarily contextualized. We are held accountable beyond the hypothetical, compelled to consider how our views affect our neighbors. Encountering the reality of our neighbors may lead to the death of an old belief or the adoption of a new one.

For Christians, this is only appropriate. In the gospels, Jesus consistently inspires conversion through relationships: Zacchaeus, Nicodemus, and many others are transformed this way. In the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman who begs the “crumbs” of Jesus’ compassion for her daughter, Jesus himself is changed through relationship: Jesus changes his mind and helps the woman; and the scope of his ministry expands from “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” to “all nations.”

Conversion to the gospel of Jesus also comes through the relationship formed between Philip and the Ethiopian official in Acts. When the official asks Philip “What is there to prevent me from being baptized?” he is not asking a theoretical question (“Who is eligible to be baptized?”) but a relational one: “Will you baptize me?”

If love converts us from a position we previously

held dear, we’re in good company. After all, Jesus’ most common instruction in Scripture isn’t “be sure to hold the correct belief.” It’s “love one another.”

### **Incarnational conversion: Not apart, but a part**

The Christian story is one of incarnation. God does not stand apart from the world; rather, God becomes a part of the world through Jesus of Nazareth—not only during his life, but also in his resurrection. Pastor and writer Frank G. Honeycutt says, “The resurrected Jesus was not a ghost. He took special pains to show the disciples that he had a body. Easter, according to this old story, is about the raising of flesh and bones—not spooks—in this life (conversion) and in the next (fulfillment).”

Conversion is not the rescue of disembodied spirit from flesh, but the transformation of the whole person; it must therefore take human nature into account. Human nature, however, is notoriously unreliable. What prevents us, post-conversion, from sliding back into our former position, making conversion a brief episode rather than a lifelong change?

One response to this problem is to try to make conversion stick by avoiding everything that might challenge the new conviction. A born-again Christian might throw out all secular music and movies. A 20-year friendship is severed because of opposing political views. A young man converted to a belief in the power of positive thinking plans to “stay positive” by ignoring the world’s news altogether.

Underlying these reactions, perhaps, is the fear that true conversion is a complete replacement of the old and inferior with the new and improved. Lingering echoes of the former self suggest that the conversion was never authentic in the first place. Is this fair?

Consider other meanings of conversion. Kitchen conversion tables translate four quarts into one gallon, but the same ingredients are used. A garage converted into a guesthouse conserves much of the original structure. Human beings are also converted like this, even



ologically speaking. In every moment, some of our cells die and others reproduce. In one sense, we are always a new creation; in another, we are the same body.

In matters of faith or personal conviction, we also remain ourselves as we change. Martin Luther interpreted Paul's analogy of death and rebirth in Romans not as a once-in-a-lifetime event, but a daily process—a daily dying and rising in Christ. A lasting conversion is a daily conversion, sometimes one that occurs moment by moment. The person we were is still found within the person we become.

Conversion lasts when it continues to be shaped by the incarnation into our human lives—a fitting reality for *semper reformanda* people.

Challenges, opposing views, and new considerations are healthy partners for a conversion that sticks. Far from setting us apart from ourselves or from others, conversion becomes a part of us, guiding our engagement in the world around us.

### **Vocational conversion: sent into the world**

Even though I grew up in the church, I never paid much attention to anything having to do with the Holy Land or of Jesus' life and ministry. That changed when I began seminary and met my roommate Dina, a Palestinian Lutheran from Ramallah, and my classmate Gabi, an Arab Christian Israeli from Galilee. More than a decade later, Gabi is my husband; and Dina is the godmother of our daughter. I have a large extended network of family and friends in Galilee and throughout the Holy Land.

Though I cannot claim to fully understand the nature of the conflict in Israel and Palestine, I can never again live as though it does not matter.

When I read news accounts about the region, it is no longer possible for me to do so abstractly, to consider statistics and policies separately from how they affect the daily lives of people with whom I am in relationship. I feel a sense of personal commitment

to doing what I can to aid the goal of a just peace for Palestinians and Israelis.

Then I hear: "I'm afraid that the church has become more focused on social issues than on conversion to Christianity." Conversion to Christian faith is viewed as distinct from conversion to justice or peace issues, as though the two are unrelated or in competition with one another.

But what if they're not? C.S. Lewis, adult convert from atheism to Christianity, said, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

Conversion becomes the light by which we see everything else—ourselves, the world around us, and our purpose in that world. Christian conversion, the process of coming to know our relationship with the triune God as central to our identity, is inherently vocational. We are called to love and serve God and our neighbors in every aspect of daily life: as neighbors, citizens, workers, family members, and friends.

My commitment to Israel/Palestine—or another's commitment to clean water, science and religion dialogue, or government policy reform—are not incidental to Christian faith. It is precisely faith in the God we know through Jesus Christ that compels us to action. It is the Holy Spirit, the source of conversion and of calling. As conversion becomes intricately woven in the fabric of life and vocational identity, it cannot help but last.

Not every conversion—to faith, to love, to changing the world—will stick for the long haul. Still, I take comfort in the promise that conversion itself is inevitable. We will change and be made new, in ways that reveal who we truly are. I know, because I've been converted by the grace of God—a blessedly sticky business. 🌿

**Meghan Johnston Aelabouni** serves as co-pastor with her husband, Gabi Aelabouni, at Trinity Lutheran Church in Fort Collins, Colo. Meghan has blogged for the *Huffington Post* and written for *The Lutheran* magazine.





# MAKING CONVERSION LAST

TRANSFORMING LIFE AND FAITH by Carol Schersten LaHurd

## Theme verse

“He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.” Acts 8:38–39

## Opening hymn

“Send Me, Jesus” (*With One Voice* 773) or “For the Fruit of All Creation” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 679)

## Overview

Several contrasting conversion stories illustrate the factors that can help religious transformation succeed or fail. Discussion of these passages will help us understand how we can strive to create communities that nurture spiritual growth.

## The visionary conversion of a former slave

The life of freed slave Sojourner Truth (Isabella) demonstrates that conversion can not only last but can evolve. Born around 1797, Isabella was the property of a rich Dutch landowner in New York and was later sold to an English-speaking family, who physically and sexually abused her. She had a daughter with a fellow slave she loved, but she was soon forced to marry an older slave with whom she had three children. Histori-

cal accounts of how she gained her freedom vary. Some say she walked to freedom; others say that one of her owners emancipated her. But by 1829, she was living in New York City as a free woman.

Her gradual conversion to Christianity included worshipping God alone in the woods; mystical visions, one of which led her to change her name to Sojourner Truth; time in a New York City cult later disbanded for morally questionable practices; and conversations with African-American leaders as such Frederick Douglass. In the 1840s she embraced the mainstream Methodist tradition and traveled around New England, speaking to many about her religious life and campaigning for the abolition of slavery and for women’s suffrage and rights. She even met with Abraham Lincoln at the White House. To the 1851 Ohio Women’s Rights Convention, she delivered her famous “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech, although the Southern dialect title was added later.

Truth remained a human rights campaigner until her death in 1883. You can download a free book about her, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, from the Kindle store at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).

## A failed conversion

Acts 8 opens with the aftermath of the stoning of Stephen, a passage we have seen previously in connection with Paul’s transformation from an opponent of Christ to his chief missionary. This kind of persecution was



the reason Jesus' disciples moved out from Jerusalem to the rest of Judea, Samaria, and beyond, as Jesus had commanded in Acts 1:8.

In Acts 8, we meet Philip, one of the new Greek-speaking evangelists chosen in Acts 6:5, now taking the good news to the mostly non-Jewish population of Samaria. His ability to heal people of demon possession and paralysis attracted the attention of a man named Simon. Simon was probably called a magician because he posed as someone able to predict the future or serve as an intermediary between deities and the human realm.

1. **READ ACTS 8:1–13.** What most impresses you about this story? Why do you think Simon believed? Not only Simon, but many among the Samaritans “listened eagerly” to Philip and felt “great joy” after witnessing his healing miracles. Notice that many had also heard Simon and been “amazed” by his magic. But in the end they believed Philip’s preaching about Jesus Christ and the “kingdom of God” and were baptized, “both men and women.” Perhaps their intuition told them that Philip’s message was authentic and Simon’s was not. After his own baptism, Simon accompanied Philip and was further impressed by the “signs and miracles” he saw.

2. **READ ACTS 8:14–25.** What new insights do we get into the quality of Simon’s conversion? How do you respond to Peter’s words and Simon’s answer in verses 20–24? What factors or experiences might help Simon to have a true conversion some day?

The story shifted abruptly when Simon saw Peter and John successfully invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit by laying hands on the newly baptized. His desire to buy such power has made Simon a symbol of all in the church who attempt to buy spiritual gifts or positions of leadership. In the Middle Ages the term *simony* was applied to those using money or power to secure for a relative a post as, say, abbot of a monastery.

We may be surprised by Peter’s harsh words in verses 20–23. But we can remember how important the call for repentance and forgiveness was in the post-resurrection preaching by Jesus’ disciples as recorded in Acts. What is the likelihood that Simon will repent and become a true believer?

### A more lasting conversion

Remember that in the mid-first century when the events of Acts were taking place, most people traveled on foot, as was the case for Paul on the road to Damascus. After Philip’s experience in Samaria he was directed by God to walk south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Acts 8:26 stresses that this was a “wilderness road.” There he met another potential convert, unlikely in several aspects: He was a foreigner from Ethiopia, a court official, and a eunuch—that is, a male castrated, perhaps in order to be considered safe to serve the Ethiopian queen.

3. **READ ACTS 8:26–40.** List some of the ways the Ethiopian man differed from Simon the magician. How do their conversion stories differ? Discuss the role of sacred scripture in this episode.

Interestingly, both Simon the magician and the Ethiopian eunuch handled money, but for rather different purposes. The Ethiopian was entrusted with the queen’s “entire treasury.” Not only had he come by chariot to worship in Jerusalem, but he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah as he traveled. Scholars are unsure whether this Ethiopian court official was a Jew of African birth or more likely, a non-Jewish God-fearer who had begun worshiping the God of the Jews whom he had met in Ethiopia or during his official travels. We can predict the authentic and potentially enduring nature of the Ethiopian’s conversion experience by seeing his eagerness to be baptized and his rejoicing afterward, even if Philip miraculously disappeared.

We can wish that Acts had given us more background on both Philip and the Ethiopian. But we

can read between the lines and suppose that studying Hebrew scripture, such as the prophet Isaiah, and spending time with believers of the one God had prepared this man for his not-so-chance encounter with an early Christian evangelist—since the Holy Spirit brought them together. Just a few verses earlier, the fact that the Samaritans received the gift of the Holy Spirit showed that the Christian mission was intended for more ethnic groups than just the disciples’ fellow Jews. Next the good news is shared with a foreigner who happened to be a black African, and one physically mutilated at that. (Castrated males may have been considered imperfect and thus not able to become full converts to Judaism; see Deuteronomy 23:1 and Leviticus 21:17–20.)

The Ethiopian’s African origin is an interesting point of contact with St. Augustine of Hippo, referred to in Session 1. This great bishop and theologian was from North Africa, and his mother was a Berber, a local ethnic group in Morocco and Algeria. Early church leaders were likely more diverse than most of us think.

### Being Philip for others in our time

Whether we are on the giving or receiving end of evangelical outreach, we can all hope for an outcome more like that of the Ethiopian eunuch than of Simon the magician from Samaria. Note that in Acts 8, when the Holy Spirit guided him to the man’s chariot, Philip did not launch into a stock missionary speech. Instead, he noticed that the man was reading from Isaiah and asked if he understood what he was reading. Philip was wise enough to meet the Ethiopian man on his own terms and to respond quickly when the man asked to be baptized. Perhaps Philip remembered that, on Pentecost, those present heard the apostles preaching in their own language. The Holy Spirit met them on their own terms.

The author of Acts portrays Paul also as adapting his evangelism to each particular audience: quoting

Greek poetry when addressing the Athenians in Acts 17 and praising King Agrippa’s knowledge of Judaism during Paul’s trial in Acts 26. In his own letters, Paul also stressed the importance of being sensitive to one’s audience when sharing the gospel. The New Testament encourages us to adapt to those with whom we share the good news and bring the message of grace in a way they can hear it, not necessarily the way with which we ourselves are most comfortable. Indeed, shaping our message of the good news for our audience can add to our own understanding. (See “Being Philip,” p. 10.)

4. **READ 1 CORINTHIANS 9:19–23.** What might Paul mean by saying he is both “free with respect to all” and “a slave to all”? How might Paul have spoken specifically to Jews? To Gentiles?

When writing to the diverse Christian community in Corinth, Paul stressed that he wanted to “win” or convert both “those under the law” (the Jews) and those “outside the law” (Gentiles). After his Damascus-road encounter with the risen Christ, Paul considered himself less under the control of the Jewish law, although that still stood as valid, and instead “under Christ’s law” (v. 21). Here, the Greek preposition *en* could be translated not only as “under” but also as “in Christ’s law”—an aspect of Paul’s concept of “life in Christ,” as we learned in Session 1. By the weak, Paul meant those Christians whose faith is new and not yet fully formed. In Corinth there were many recent converts in that category.

The bottom line for Paul: Exercise your own freedom as a Christian, but do nothing to jeopardize the faith or wellbeing of others. Paul ended this section of his letter with the words, “Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved” (1 Corinthians 10:32). Paul’s advice to the



Corinthians can guide our own evangelism efforts in at least two ways: 1) we can strive to present our story of the good news in terms that will be understood and welcomed, and 2) we can take care to avoid behaviors that might weaken or confuse new Christians.

5. Take a few minutes to think of times when you and/or your congregation have made an effort to bring new people to worship and the life of the church. What strategies have worked to appeal to people different from your congregation's typical member profile?

6. **READ LUKE 18:18–27.** Jesus, of course, spent much of his earthly ministry reaching out to those on the margins of society as well as those hostile to his message. In Luke 18, Jesus was in the midst of teaching in parables and stressing the need to enter God's kingdom as a little child (18:17) when he was interrupted by a question from a rich ruler. What were some factors that prevented this man from having the type of successful conversion experienced by the Ethiopian man in Acts 8?

When Jesus reminded the ruler of the commandments, the man said he had obeyed them. Jesus replied that two further steps were necessary: 1) share your wealth with the poor and 2) follow me (18:22). The ruler's hardness provided the clue that his conversion would not succeed. The man was simply too attached to his wealth to accept Jesus' invitation to life in Christ.

Despite Jesus' words here about how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, for some people today, great wealth is not necessarily the chief barrier to life in Christ. Indeed, Luke sometimes portrays even wealthy people as faithful to God. Tax collector Zaccheus, after meeting Jesus, gave away only half of his possessions. Jesus responded by saying: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:8–10).

The barriers to spiritual transformation can be any remnant of the old lives we don't want to leave behind: hunting and fishing on Sunday mornings, preferring the familiar company of the bowling league to the effort to find a welcoming congregation, or adopting a worldview that leaves no room for the mysteries of Christian faith. Perhaps the barrier is not what we would leave behind but the human resistance to change of any kind, to stepping out of our comfortable routine. (See "Barriers to Transformation," p. 6.)

Look again at Luke 18. We cannot know from the end of the rich ruler's story whether he would someday repent and turn his life toward God rather than his fortune. This potential outcome is hinted at by Jesus' words, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (18:27). Scholar Beverly Roberts Gaventa says that for Luke "conversion is always initiated by God." Reflecting on this month's conversion stories from Acts and Luke, we can conclude that, when it comes to helping others find the faith, we must simply do our best and leave the outcome to God. Especially important is forming a welcoming community for people who arrive at our church's door with or without our direct invitation. Community is central to ensuring that conversion lasts. As Gaventa concludes, "Conversion is not an end in itself but, in Luke's stories, it is a beginning" (*From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament*, Fortress, 1986).

7. Take a few minutes to recall ways you and/or your congregation have tried to become the type of community that invites and supports spiritual conversion and growth.

### Transformation both lasting and evolving

8. **READ MATTHEW 15:21–28.** What clues does Matthew give us to this woman's outside status? Why is Jesus at first reluctant to help her? Why does he change his mind? By the end of the story, which characters have been transformed and in what ways?

Whether we are concerned with the young faith of a new convert or the lifelong journey of someone born into the Christian tradition, we need to consider what it means for religious conversion and for transformation more broadly to be life-long. (See “Making Conversion Stick,” p. 38.) Does lasting transformation mean that one’s beliefs and practices never change? Or is the matter more complicated than that? Matthew, Mark, and Luke all present Jesus telling the brief parable about putting new wine into old wineskins (Matthew 9:14–17, Mark 2:21–22, Luke 5:33–39)—that is, forcing new understandings of God into an old way of thinking. Even Jesus himself may have on occasion come to new awareness of the mission God intended for him. Both Mark and Matthew retell Jesus’ encounter with a very persistent Canaanite woman during a visit in or near the non-Jewish coastal region of Tyre and Sidon, now part of Lebanon (Mark 7:25–30, Matthew 15:21–28).

Many scholars agree that among the four gospels, Matthew is the most Jewish in content and style. Most also believe Matthew used Mark’s gospel as a source, as did Luke and, perhaps, John. In Mark’s version of this story, we are told the woman was “a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin.” But Mark includes neither the part about the disciples’ wanting to send her away, nor Jesus’ declaration, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24).

Matthew calls the woman a “Canaanite,” a term that has negative connotations for any of Matthew’s readers familiar with the Israelites’ pagan neighbors and occasional enemies. Her reference to “children” and “dogs” further underscores her ethnic and religious differences.

But she dared to remind Jesus that one need not take bread intended for Jewish children in order to feed hungry Gentiles, metaphorical dogs. But one can let the dogs have the crumbs that fall to the floor. Her argument was very persuasive. Not only did Jesus agree to heal the woman’s daughter, he commended her great faith.

We can draw at least two conclusions from this encounter: 1) no one is too marginal to be worthy of our care, and 2) the gospel writers show even Jesus learning from experience, in this case changing his mind about whether a non-Jew should also benefit from his healing ministry.

9. Spend some time during this next month thinking about two questions: How have I changed my mind about God or about how best to relate to and worship God during my life? How do I measure the value of my own life thus far?

My own attempt to answer the second question is far from work in progress, and the answer changes as I grow older and give increasing weight to the relationships I value most: 1) with God who, for me, is the center of value and ground of all that exists, and 2) with my family and with the many communities I am part of.

Because my vocation is to study and teach about the Bible and about the interaction among the three Abrahamic religious traditions, I have been actively answering the question above since I served as a parish education director and then began graduate work in religious studies more than 30 years ago.

In these decades of studying the Bible and being in dialogue and friendship with people of other faiths, my mind has changed about this issue, and so have my understandings of my Christian beliefs and my interaction with those of other religious traditions.

Just as Jesus in Matthew 16 came to value a woman who was viewed as both foreigner and pagan, I have come to value the depth of daily worship and moral behavior I have witnessed in my Jewish and Muslim friends.

From them, I have learned to ask new questions of biblical passages I have read many times. My appreciation for the theology of a triune God has been strengthened through a sense of gratitude to the creator God these traditions share.



What examples in your own life indicate such transforming changes and the value that has come from them?

### In the media

You may find additional links to help you with the study on the [gathermagazine.org](http://gathermagazine.org) Bible study webpage.

### Looking ahead

Suffering is an inevitable part of human life. Next month we will look at some varied ways the Bible portrays suffering and the impact and value of suffering.

### Closing prayer

Sing or pray “Lord, Speak to Us, That We May Speak” (ELW 676). 🌿

**Carol Schersten LaHurd** is a lifelong teacher. For the past 30 years, she has taught biblical studies, Islam, and interfaith relations in colleges, seminaries, the church, and the wider community. She holds a Ph.D. in New Testament from the University of Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. She is author of “Luke’s Vision: The People of God,” the 1998 Bible study for *Lutheran Woman Today* (now *Gather*).

# Share.



Photos: (Left) A Café group from Middletown, Ohio. Photo by Elizabeth McBride. (Right) Women from San Clemente, Calif. Photo courtesy of Kelly Frohner.



For more than 10 years, *Café* ([boldcafe.org](http://boldcafe.org)), Women of the ELCA’s online magazine has been a resource for young women who want to talk about their lives and faith. Most of *Café*’s writers are young women in ministry and they are paid for their stories. You can support this ministry by visiting the “[Donate Now](#)” tab.

For a \$400 donation to this ministry, we’ll add your name to our Podcast. For more information, contact Elizabeth McBride, editor, [elizabeth.mcbride@elca.org](mailto:elizabeth.mcbride@elca.org).

*Café* is a publication of  
Women of the **ELCA** 



# RESOLVE

to stay in touch with  
a broader community of  
women who share your  
faith in Jesus Christ.

Women <sup>of the</sup> ELCA 

*Just \$15 a year for 10 issues.*

Yearly subscriptions to *Gather* are a great way to share your faith with friends and family. Participate in our award-winning Bible study together all year long. Call (800) 328-4648 or visit us online at [www.gathermagazine.org](http://www.gathermagazine.org).







RACE NOTES

## The Balm of Forgiveness

Linda Post Bushkofsky



## Last September I went

to the convention of the Eastern North Dakota Synodical Women's Organization, leading a Bible study on forgiveness based on the petition in the Lord's Prayer "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). I enjoyed looking at the language of forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer and how the different words of "debts," "trespasses," and "sins" shape our thinking about forgiveness. Digging into The Large Catechism, I reflected on Martin Luther's words on this petition that call us to make our heart "right with God." I pondered forgiveness as "a constant attitude," as Martin Luther King Jr. described it or, as Marina Cantacuzion, the director of The Forgiveness Project ([theforgivenessproject.com](http://theforgivenessproject.com)), described it: forgiveness as "part of a continuum of human engagements in healing broken relationships."

I was excited when my research took another turn and I landed on the Stanford Forgiveness Project website ([learnintoorgive.com](http://learnintoorgive.com)). There I encountered Dr. Frederic Luskin, director of the project, who explains that research shows forgiveness can promote psychological, relational, and physical health. I was immediately drawn to the comparisons between the health benefits of forgiveness and the goals of our own health initiative that focus on the emotional, spiritual, and physical health of women.

In a related vein, research has shown that loneliness is linked to serious health problems like depression, sleep disorders, and chronic pain, among others.

The World Health Organization ranks loneliness as carrying a higher health risk than smoking. Research also shows that friendships and social networks can lead to healthier diets, more exercise, and better sleep habits, and that strong social ties promote brain health as you age.

Our health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls, turns 10 in 2015. We are given new opportunities to bring new life to the initiative as we plan our programming for this year.

We know that healthy women can produce healthy families, churches, and communities, and they can develop healthy, more just and more holistic societies. Given the health benefits of forgiveness, what emphasis could we as an organization place on forgiveness? Where could you start in your congregational unit? Where could you start in your personal life? Given the health risks associated with loneliness, what emphasis can we, as an organization, place on community? Who have you invited in? These questions raise programming possibilities for 2015!

Terry Waite, the British author and humanitarian who was held hostage in Lebanon from 1987–1991, reminds us: "Not only is forgiveness essential for the health of society, it is also vital for our personal well-being. Bitterness is like a cancer that enters the soul."

Yes, there it is, forgiveness involves healing broken relationships, relationships lived out in community. 🌸

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.





AMEN!

## The Weight of Forgiveness

by Catherine Malotky

### David and Bathsheba

is a story that's been framed for me. I see it through the eyes of those who taught me to look at David, to focus on his interaction with Nathan. To be sure, "You are the man," is a poignant and indicting accusation. David did not wince, but, eyes opened, saw his crime. His crime was against Uriah. This is how I was taught.

But this story, God, is also about the women and children. It's about Bathsheba, who was ordered to the king's house and there taken to his bed. Can we call it rape? It is possible Uriah was a scoundrel and David saved her from the misery of her marriage, but that is not the way the story is told. It was all about David's desire and his power to act on it. What about Bathsheba?

David robbed her of her power over her own body. Then, when she conceived, he robbed her of her husband and the life she knew. She mourned for Uriah, and when the time was right, David took her once again, and made her his wife. I wonder what she thought and felt about all this.

In her world, she was property. Her beauty made her appealing, but like all women, she was handed over by her father to her husband. In my world, God, I am not a commodity, though many girls and women still are. My heart goes out to Bathsheba and all the girls and women whose lives were and are devalued. I grieve for her, and I'm angry.

The indignities went on. Nathan explains the consequences of David's

actions: "[God] will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun" (2 Samuel 12:11). What did the women think about this? David certainly was shamed, but what cost came to the women as they lived with the consequences downstream?

And then: "...because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die" (12:14). The child was born to Bathsheba, too, not just David. Her son would die. We hear about how David managed his grief, but nothing about Bathsheba's grief.

God, why have women for so long been lorded over? Why do these stories perpetuate the notion that we count less? Girls and women have been paying this price for generations upon generations. Where is your justice?

Forgiveness is no small matter when the debt of injustice is so great. Others also know this demeaning: Africans stolen for slaves; gay, lesbian, bi, transgendered (GLBT) folk killed as abominations; Native Americans punished for speaking their language; Jews slaughtered; Palestinians denied a homeland. The list is long.

Forgive us, God, our arrogance when we demean others and our passivity when we devalue others. Teach us to release debts owed to us, that we might serve you and your indiscriminate love. In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌸

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky**, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropic adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.





**GETTING HEALTHY** Almost \$31,000 was raised at the 2014 Run, Walk and Roll event held at the Women of the ELCA triennial gathering last July. Held at two previous gatherings, the event raises money to provide grants to women's units that want to improve the health and wellness of women and girls. To date, about 25 units have received grants to hold Raising Up Women and Girls health events. For more information about the program or how to receive a grant, visit [www.welca.org](http://www.welca.org) and click on Our Work/Special Initiatives.

Photos, bottom left: Jennifer Hall, left, and Alex Gomez, of Newark, Del., serve as staff for the Run, Walk, and Roll. Right: Jen Quanrud, Preston, Minn., gives the event a thumbs up. Top left: Erin Reynolds, Lowdonville, Ohio, l-r, Tammy Devine, ELCA wellness manager at Portico Benefit Service, Minneapolis, Minn., and the Rev. Beth Birkholz, Marietta, Ga., lead the pack. Erin was the first to finish both the 2011 and 2014 races. Photos by Elizabeth McBride and Jim Veneman

## DIRECTORY OF READER SERVICES

### SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE

Change of address, renewals, questions about your subscription, and new subscription orders must be addressed to our subscription order center at Augsburg Fortress. 1 year/10 issues \$15

**800-328-4648**

Gather Subscription Order Center

Box 1553

Minneapolis, MN 55440-8730

[subscriptions@augburgfortress.org](mailto:subscriptions@augburgfortress.org)

### Audio CD Edition, \$18

**800-328-4648**

### Permission to reprint articles

**800-421-0239**

[copyright@augburgfortress.org](mailto:copyright@augburgfortress.org)

### Bible Study Resource Orders

Bible Study Leader Guides, Companion Bibles, etc.

**800-638-3522, ext. 2580**

### Like Us on Facebook

[www.facebook.com/gathermagazine](http://www.facebook.com/gathermagazine)

### Bible Study Videos

[gathermagazine.org](http://gathermagazine.org)

### Gather Editorial Office

For editorial feedback, magazine promotion questions, article suggestions, or advertising inquiries write or e-mail:

Gather Editorial Office

Women of the ELCA

8765 W. Higgins Rd.

Chicago, IL 60631-4189

**800-638-3522, ext. 2730**

[gather@elca.org](mailto:gather@elca.org) [gathermagazine.org](http://gathermagazine.org)

*Stir the spirit within! Go to [www.boldcafe.org](http://www.boldcafe.org).*



#BXNRXWW \*\*\*\*\*SCH 5-DIGIT 94706 FSS  
#81000056489# 1000000547 MAR15 1286  
GRADUATE THEOL UNION LIB - SERIALS  
2400 RIDGE RD  
BERKELEY CA 94709-1212

1286  
P626  
630  
978

Please direct all changes of address to Augsburg Fortress, Publishers (see Reader Services).

## A resource that helps congregations and families with faith formation

*The Little Lutheran* provides children ages 1 to 7 with theologically sound, age-appropriate Bible stories, songs, Christian history, global mission stories and more. A gift of 10 issues a year tells children just how much God loves them and that Jesus is their savior and friend.

Group subscriptions (five or more) are \$15.95 for 10 issues a year. Individual and multiple-year subscriptions are also available.

Visit [www.thelittlelutheran.org](http://www.thelittlelutheran.org) or call 800-328-4648.

# The Little Lutheran

